

*Annual Review of Sociology*Impacts of Immigration
Policies on FamiliesLeisy J. Abrego¹ and Lucia León²¹Department of Chicana/o and Central American Studies, University of California, Los Angeles, California, USA; email: abrego@ucla.edu²Department of Latino Studies and Social Justice, Dominican University of California, San Rafael, California, USA; email: lucia.leon@dominican.eduANNUAL
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**Keywords**

immigrant families, immigration laws, family separation, undocumented immigrants, detention, deportation

Abstract

US immigration policies have profound impacts on immigrant families. In a robust field of study across disciplines, scholars have documented how the multi-layered, complex immigration regime opens and closes doors to opportunity, health, education, safety, and peace. With a rise in harsh and unpredictable enforcement practices, immigrant families—including undocumented, liminally legal, and US citizen members—navigate the contradictory laws at the federal, state, and local levels to thrive as best as they can. In our review, we encourage scholars to extend their analysis to what happens during the migrant journey and at the border, as these experiences are also impacted by US immigration policies and potentially impact families long after they settle in the United States. The ever-changing labyrinthine legal landscape and its expansive reach provide fertile ground for further research, and we urge scholars to center ethics in their work with immigrant families made vulnerable through immigration laws.

INTRODUCTION

In a move away from a strictly cultural approach to the sociological study of immigrant assimilation, contemporary scholarship more centrally considers the structural contexts receiving racially diverse newcomers (Waters & Jiménez 2005), with a particular emphasis on the role of immigration laws for determining how immigrants fare (Menjívar & Abrego 2012). The 46.2 million immigrants in the United States comprise 13.9% of the total US population (Batalova 2024). Including their US-born children, members of immigrant families number 90.8 million and make up 27% of the total population (Batalova 2024). These families are richly diverse by country of origin or ancestry, race, class, educational attainment, length of residence in the United States, household composition, geographic location, and immigration status, among other characteristics. Members of immigrant families are community members, students, workers, cultural producers, volunteers, congregants, and contributors to the US social fabric. Their impact is felt through faith-based, politically inspired, or employment-related actions that offer the necessary new energy and ideas to sustain vibrant communities across the country (Singer et al. 2008). However, as we cover in this review, studies show that immigrant families' positive contributions are markedly dampened by punitive immigration laws.

Our survey of the robust literature across sociology, anthropology, public health, education, and other fields finds that immigrant families' life chances are indisputably determined by immigration laws. We begin by describing immigration laws at the federal, state, and local levels—what they legislate and how their implementation changes with new presidential, gubernatorial, and mayoral administrations. Then, we trace how these laws not only grant or block access to educational, financial, medical, and social welfare resources but also seep into intimate relationships to shape family roles and dynamics. Then we widen our scope to argue that immigration laws significantly complement US foreign policies in ways that directly and profoundly affect migrants and their families long before they arrive in the United States. Finally, we cover the scholarship on how recent immigration policies have been particularly harmful for migrant families seeking humanitarian relief at the southern US border. Notably, each theme is rich enough to merit its own comprehensive review, but we opted for breadth and were unable to include all relevant studies in every area. Given the constant changes in immigration policy, and especially when looking beyond US territory, there is ample space for scholars to continue to document and analyze the far-reaching consequences of immigration law on families across space and generations. We urge migration scholars to think regionally and transnationally, connecting the dots between foreign and migration policy as these cumulatively shape immigrant families long after they have settled in or been deported from the United States. And we strongly advocate for ethically sound research methods that protect immigrant families and communities from the laws and associated consequences that we cover in this review.

UNDERSTANDING FEDERAL, STATE, AND LOCAL US IMMIGRATION LAWS

US immigration policy is complex, with multiple scales of legislation that in practice are often at odds with one another. Immigration scholars must understand the basics of these laws to carefully interpret their effects on families. At the federal level, the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA)—a comprehensive collection of federal regulations, policies, memoranda, executive orders, amendments, and provisions of immigration law in the United States Code—purports

to prioritize family unity.¹ Scholars demonstrate, however, that in practice, US immigration laws uphold and prolong family separation when they “(1) determine which family members can be admitted, how many, and in what priority; (2) set minimum income levels for sponsoring the entry of a family member; (3) bar legal reentry into the United States after a period of unauthorized residence; and (4) stipulate the treatment of immigrants residing without authorization and in temporary protected status” (Enchautegui & Menjívar 2015, p. 33). In effect, federal immigration law determines who is legally permitted to reside in the country, what legal status is conferred upon them, how much the government will spend on enforcement, and the number and type of people who are detained and deported from one presidential administration to another.

The INA establishes the list of possible immigration legal statuses, each determining individuals’ rights and access to resources. The spectrum of legal statuses includes undocumented (unauthorized to reside in the United States), liminally legal [through a number of temporary statuses, including awaiting adjudication for an asylum case, Temporary Protected Status, and Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA)], Legal Permanent Resident (LPR, with permission to live and work in the United States), and naturalized US citizen. Notably, there are currently 11.2 million undocumented immigrants and 2.5 million immigrants in what sociologist Cecilia Menjívar (2006) termed liminal statuses in the United States (Batalova 2024). For those who are eligible, adjustment to LPR status grants immigrants a lower immediate threat of deportation, opportunities for legal employment, a promise of almost all constitutional rights, access to some public benefits, and eligibility in 3–5 years to apply for naturalized US citizenship (Obinna 2020, p. 391). On the spectrum of immigration statuses, naturalized US citizens are the most legally protected.

The INA, however, establishes few paths for legalization. While family reunification is the most common among the 675,000 immigrant visas available per year, this provision benefits mainly immediate relatives of US citizens who meet certain age and financial requirements, and select relatives of LPRs who are made to wait longer (Am. Immigr. Coun. 2024b). Moreover, because no single nationality is permitted to make up more than 7% of the annual immigration flow, scholars find that families attempting to reunite from countries with a high volume of applications are made to wait years or even decades (Obinna 2020)—a separation that legal scholar Stephen Lee (2019) argues can feel like a slow death for families. Scholars also underscore that the INA especially harms what are considered to be nontraditional families in the US context when it establishes eligibility. With preferences for spouses and minor children, queer and multigenerational families are likely to be excluded (Coe 2013, Hwang & Parreñas 2010, Luibhéid & Chávez 2021, Maldonado Domínguez 2020).

Due to various complicating factors, the extensive documentation of the law as compiled in the INA does little to clarify or predict the actual outcomes of the law’s implementation. For example, although Congress has not passed comprehensive immigration legislation in almost four decades, it has passed bills about immigration enforcement and social welfare benefits that deeply impact immigrant families across legal statuses (Abrego et al. 2017, Asad 2023, Fujiwara 2008). Furthermore, each presidential administration makes administrative decisions about when and how to implement immigration policies, relying on leadership from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and on executive orders to set new enforcement agendas.

Also adding to the complexity is the fact that while federal immigration law certainly matters, the day-to-day details of immigrant family life are more directly impacted by state and local

¹For more information on the INA, readers are directed to <https://www.uscis.gov/laws-and-policy/legislation/immigration-and-nationality-act>.

policies. Indeed, immigrants' presence is felt most immediately at the local level—in neighborhoods, schools, workplaces, healthcare facilities, and houses of worship—so, states and localities also propose and pass immigration-related bills. Drawing on their own state and local budgets, state laws can be supportive or punitive, and cities and counties can decide whether to work closely with federal immigration authorities to detain migrants or not. Sometimes these laws counter federal immigration laws, resulting in confusion and uncertainty for immigrant families.

Yet another dimension to consider is that immigration laws at each of these scales also interact with other kinds of laws to shape immigrant families' lives. For example, even when unauthorized to reside in the country, immigrants have legal rights as workers, students, renters, and human beings (Abrego 2006, Gleeson 2012). As we demonstrate in this review, there is a robust scholarly literature that captures how these complex legal and discursive conditions establish opportunities, resources, restraints, and harms that can boost, burden, bond, or break immigrant families.

IMMIGRATION LAW'S IMPACTS ON IMMIGRANT FAMILIES IN THE UNITED STATES

In this section, we review contemporary research on US federal, state, and local immigration policies' effects on families and individuals within families. Some immigrant families are made up of all US citizens (by naturalization or birth), and others may include all undocumented members, while others, yet, are mixed-status, in which one or both parents or romantic partners are noncitizens while at least one child or partner is a citizen (Fix & Zimmerman 2001). Each federally determined legal status establishes an individual's level of access to employment, education, social services, and legal protections. And although undocumented family members are certainly the most vulnerable to immigration policies and enforcement, scholars consistently find that given the emotional bonds and economic responsibilities of families, all members of mixed-status families, including US citizens, are deeply impacted (Abrego 2019, Castañeda 2019, Enriquez 2015, Mangual Figueroa 2012, Menjívar et al. 2016, Rodriguez 2023, Valdivia 2019, Vargas & Ybarra 2017, Yoshikawa 2011).

Existing research on undocumented and mixed-status families concentrates in key areas that include enforcement, detention and deportation, family separation, financial needs, access to social services and medical care, education, and physical and mental well-being (Hall et al. 2025). Although each theme warrants its own extensive review, we cover each briefly here.

Racialization and the Unpredictability of Enforcement

Immigration laws produce fear and confusion for immigrant families. This is especially true about enforcement practices. Because they are established nationally by changing presidential administrations and revolving leadership at DHS, and locally by state and city leaders, immigration enforcement practices change often. Indeed, the high frequency of changes is enough to keep researchers busy documenting the associated consequences in immigrant families' lives. Since the Clinton administration signed the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) into the INA in 1996, for example, there have been provisions to permit local sheriff departments to do the work of immigration enforcement (Abrego et al. 2017). IIRIRA's 287(g) program established voluntary communication channels between local law enforcement, DHS, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) to locate a newly expanded category of "deportable" immigrants, making LPRs newly vulnerable to deportation (Abrego et al. 2017). The Obama administration further expanded this sharing practice in their Secure Communities program by requiring all local sheriff departments across the country to be deputized to conduct immigration enforcement. Secure Communities enabled sheriffs to racially profile, detain, and

deport a record-breaking number of immigrants during the Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations (ACLU 2022). Scholars have played a key role in documenting the outcomes of these policy changes. For example, because officers could now send information even about people with minor traffic infractions to DHS and the FBI, many immigrant parents of minor children were deported (Martinez-Donate et al. 2024). Between 2011 and 2013 alone, almost half a million children experienced the apprehension, detention, or deportation of a parent (Capps et al. 2015), with lasting repercussions for families.

Using research methods that include riding along with the police, court observations, ethnography, and in-depth interviews with immigrants in different places across the country, scholars find that the unpredictability of enforcement practices is especially stress inducing. Along with frequent changes in law, the unpredictability is due to the vast discretion immigration law grants to law enforcement officers, Border Patrol agents, asylum officers, and judges (Armenta 2017, Asad 2023). Various similar cases of undocumented immigrants stopped by police for minor traffic infractions, for example, could have vastly different outcomes. One person may be released with just a warning; another may be fined and released; yet another may have their car towed and be released; and another may be violently arrested in front of their children, then detained, and ultimately deported. Each of these outcomes would be covered under the discretionary power of immigration law, and according to interviews with immigrants, such unpredictability induces great stress for families. In a highly race-conscious society, moreover, scholars find that public discourse misrepresents and negatively racializes Latine and Black immigrants (Ceciliano-Navarro 2024), informing the actions of state agents who are legally protected even when they enact racist practices (Aranda & Vaquera 2015).

The US immigration enforcement budget has continued to increase (Akkerman 2023). Immigration scholars document how, despite politicians' claims that policies are race-neutral, each increase in the enforcement budget further criminalizes and makes racialized immigrant families more vulnerable. Closely examining patterns across existing research and in publicly available arrest data, scholars demonstrate that under current laws, all racial discrimination in non-immigration-related law enforcement can feed into immigrant detention and deportation (Saadi et al. 2020). In fact, arrests for immigration-related offenses constituted 59% of all federal criminal arrests by 2019 (Martínez 2022). As a result, Latines constituted 58% of all defendants charged in US district court in 2019, mostly due to the rise in new enforcement practices that consider illegal entry and illegal reentry as federal immigration charges (Martínez 2022, pp. 601–2). Moreover, 97% of all detained immigrants are Latin American or Caribbean, and although only 7% of noncitizens are Black, they make up 20% of those facing deportation on criminal grounds (Saadi et al. 2020).

Detention and Deportation

Ramped up enforcement has led to unprecedented numbers of detentions and deportations in the twenty-first century. Scholars have conducted court observations and surveys with current and former detained immigrants and their families, and they have analyzed nationally representative administrative records of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detentions to thoroughly document the violence of the justice system toward immigrants and its long-lasting harms on families (Eagly et al. 2018, O'Connor et al. 2015, Patler & Gonzalez 2021, Schriro 2017). Analyzing data from the American Community Survey, scholars also confirm that immigration control increases cases of deportation and alters household living arrangements (Amuedo-Dorantes & Arenas-Arroyo 2019). Their findings reveal that even US citizen and permanent resident family members of detained immigrants suffer the material and emotional hardships produced through this system.

Complementing these findings, qualitative interviews with immigrants and their families provide details about the more personal and intimate consequences of immigration law. For example, even the knowledge of increased ICE presence in their neighborhoods raises immigrant families' stress levels (Ceciliano-Navarro 2024, Valdivia 2019). When a family member is arrested, immigrant families' sense of threat and uncertainty is further heightened when they are given little information about where their loved one is detained, how long they will be held, or whether they will be deported (Martínez-Aranda 2020). Undocumented immigrants are often unable to visit their detained loved ones due to fear of being apprehended, as well (Ceciliano-Navarro 2024). Similar to the impacts of mass incarceration, detention undermines family cohesion (Andrews & Khayar-Cámara 2020), and the longer immigrants are detained, the more heightened the suffering for them and their families (Ryo & Peacock 2018).

Participatory and interview-based research provide more details about how deportations rupture families and change parenting practices, placing sudden and enormous burdens on the families left behind (Valdivia 2021). The scholarship on deportation underscores that the practice and the aftermath of deportation can be understood through a gender lens. For example, Latino men, who are disproportionately targeted for deportations (Golash-Boza & Hondagneu-Sotelo 2013), retain their identities as fathers and maintain practical and emotional roles in their families' lives only when they have spent minimal time in detention prior to deportation (Andrews & Khayar-Cámara 2020). Following arrests and deportations, as the providers of daily care work (Abrego & Menjívar 2011, Abrego & Schmalzbauer 2018, Bickham Mendez 2020, Farfán-Santos 2022), suddenly single mothers become the family's primary source for economic, social, and emotional support at a time when they feel most lonely and vulnerable (Dreby 2015). Often undocumented themselves, they struggle to find employment, childcare, and resources to prevent housing and food insecurities (Schmalzbauer 2014). These women and children are forced to adapt financially and emotionally with no advance notice while they navigate their own shock and fear (Lopez 2019, Valdivia 2021, Ceciliano-Navarro 2024). Sometimes, the eldest sibling must unexpectedly take over parenting responsibilities while trying to complete college, as well (Valdivia 2021). Family reunification is almost impossible (Andrews 2023), and each family member must renegotiate their sudden new roles as primary or secondary breadwinners, while simultaneously learning to maintain family ties across borders. In these ways, detention and deportation deeply shape even the most intimate aspects of immigrant family life.

Detentions and deportations also have grave impacts on children. The fear and uncertainty after a sudden parent-child separation and the economic instability that alters their home and school experiences can be devastating (Dreby & Macias 2023, Fuentes-Balderrama et al. 2024). Employing standardized psychological assessments and surveys with children and associated caregivers, psychology and child development scholars find that US citizen children in these families can experience anxiety, depression, loss of appetite, sleeplessness, and behavioral problems when a parent is detained (Rojas-Flores et al. 2017, Zayas et al. 2015). Ethnographic and longitudinal studies also enhance our understanding of the breadth and depth of deportation effects on children when they employ a life course approach. In interviews with young adults who experienced parents' deportations during their childhood, Dreby (2022) suggests that the severity of enforcement impacts can be mediated by community networks that help them reframe their experiences as ones of injustice, in turn avoiding victimization later in life.

Family Separation

Deportation is only one mechanism leading to family separation. While the wealthy and those considered to be uniquely skilled are likely to enter with few restrictions on their families, the

opposite is true for families with limited resources. Qualitative research based on ethnographic and interview methods conducted both with immigrants in the United States and with relatives in the home countries finds that transnational families sometimes live apart to earn higher wages in the United States to send to their families back home (Coe 2013) and to avoid exposing loved ones to the dangers of the migrant trails (Abrego 2014, Dreby 2010, Schmalzbauer 2004). During the period of separation, immigrants' legal statuses, as conferred through immigration law, determine their access to jobs, wages, and living conditions, shaping their own and their families' economic well-being in the home country. Undocumented immigrants and their families across borders, therefore, are especially likely to struggle financially (Abrego 2014). Scholars note that without changes to federal immigration law, it can be many years before these families are able to reunite (Lee 2019). Even migrants who arrive with temporary visas or refugee status can be separated from their families if they overstay their visas or refugee policies unexpectedly change (Albansahli et al. 2023, McCallum 2019, Parreñas 2005).

Qualitative research also explores the lasting emotional consequences of this type of family separation for people who experience it during childhood. For children left behind, separation from a parent can feel like abandonment when their family migrates in stages (Suárez-Orozco et al. 2010). And when extreme poverty forces minors to be the first in their families to migrate, they must navigate mental health challenges while working to provide for their parents and younger siblings back home (Canizales 2024). By volunteering with service and legal organizations over several years, qualitative sociologists have gained the trust of youth to document their struggles to earn a living, attend school, and legalize their status while being apart from loved ones in a new country (Canizales 2024, Galli 2023, Tenorio 2024). Despite the purported humanitarian nature of refugee status, historians and medical researchers alike find that US policies separate even refugees from their families over extended periods, with deeply detrimental impacts (Casavantes Bradford 2022, Miller et al. 2018).

Quantitative scholars have also played an important role in documenting how immigration policies continue to spur family separation. With Freedom of Information Act requests to access data sets from the Border Patrol and the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), these researchers have brought to light the sharp increase in the number and length of apprehensions of minors separated from adult caregivers during the Trump administration's zero-tolerance border policy (ZTBP). They found that 208,000 minors between the ages of 0 and 18 were held under ZTBP. The vast majority are Central Americans, with 45.2% coming from Guatemala, 25.6% from Honduras, and 22.7% from El Salvador, followed by 2.6% from Mexico and 3.9% from all other countries (Amuedo-Dorantes & Bucheli 2024, p. 999). ZTBP lowered the chances of family reunification (Amuedo-Dorantes & Bucheli 2024), and psychologists have found that reunification after any period of family separation is challenging. At the time of reunification, families struggle to establish healthy bonds and children do not trust their parents, even though the separation was structured by the immigration system (Suárez-Orozco et al. 2010). Given the recency of these practices, more research is needed to ascertain long-term consequences for families.

Financial Needs, Social Services, and Medical Care

Understandably, undocumented and mixed-status immigrant families often navigate US society in fear, carefully trying to avoid deportation (Menjívar & Abrego 2012). In such a punitive environment, though not impossible, it is difficult for families to cover their needs and provide healthy socialization—basic functions of families—but scholars reveal that these experiences vary (sometimes drastically) across states. For example, while the INA establishes the employment of undocumented immigrants as a crime, many industries and employers rely on the essential labor

of undocumented immigrants with unequal protections across states and counties (Gleeson 2012, Schmalzbauer 2014). Comparative studies find that jobs available to undocumented immigrant parents tend to be among the most dangerous and poorly remunerated, leaving families vulnerable to exploitation, injuries, and poverty (Abrego 2014, Walter et al. 2004). At the same time, even undocumented immigrant parents may achieve some stability at work and better provide for their families in states with pro-immigrant legislation (Abrego & Gleeson 2014), while the opposite is true in states with anti-immigrant legislation (Menjívar 2013).

Care in immigrant families also requires access to social services and medical attention, forcing families to make difficult decisions about if and when to engage with government agencies. The complexity of immigration laws makes these systems confusing to navigate (Van Natta 2023). The INA includes a 1996 social welfare amendment that blocks undocumented immigrants and LPRs from accessing Medicaid (Fujiwara 2008). Nonimmigrants with temporary statuses like Temporary Protected Status or DACA and asylum seekers are also ineligible. Qualified immigrants, refugees, asylees, and LPRs can be eligible for health coverage through Medicaid or the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP). But states and localities can increase or narrow health coverage for all immigrant families. For example, 16 states exclude children and mothers who have been LPRs for less than five years from accessing CHIP or pregnancy care, even though these are covered at the federal level. On the other hand, six states use their own funds to cover immigrants who are otherwise ineligible for federal programs. California, New York, and Colorado offer their own state-funded Medicaid-equivalent programs (Buettgens & Ramchandani 2023). California has also expanded state coverage to all low-income children (Ayón et al. 2020, p. 997) and in 2024 became the first state to extend coverage to all low-income residents, regardless of age or immigration status.

Around the country, scholars note that there is still much misinformation regarding which immigrant families qualify when and where for social and medical services (Akers Chacón 2022, Park 2011). Drawing on nationally representative surveys, court observations, and interviews with immigrant families, Asad (2023) finds that many undocumented parents do take calculated risks to access social services. On the other hand, other studies using survey, ethnographic, and interview data reveal that immigrant families sometimes avoid preventative and basic medical care (Ayón et al. 2020, Farfán-Santos 2021, Hainmueller et al. 2017, Perreira & Pedroza 2019, Vargas 2015), especially in places with severe immigration enforcement practices (Gómez Cervantes & Menjívar 2020, Van Natta 2023). Although their US citizen children are eligible for social services, undocumented parents also tend to underutilize these due to fear of disclosing their immigration status (Yoshikawa 2011), thereby increasing their vulnerability to poverty. The stakes are especially high for families of the estimated 765,000 children of undocumented immigrants with special needs (Bitsko et al. 2016), for elderly undocumented immigrants (Ayón et al. 2020), and for immigrants with terminal illnesses (Swami et al. 2023). These are areas in which more research is needed to understand how immigration policy impacts families who require specialized medical services.

Education

Federal and state immigration policies also determine families' educational trajectories. Providing an education to their children is one of the most common reasons parents state for migrating (Menjívar et al. 2016). Since 1982, the Supreme Court ruling *Plyler v. Doe* (1982) has barred public schools from excluding undocumented children. And while immigrant parents encourage their children to attain a college degree, state immigration policies facilitate or hinder their chances when they categorize undocumented immigrants as state residents or international students for the purpose of tuition. Using quantitative and qualitative methods, scholars have documented the

ways in-state college tuition policies (Flores 2010) allow children of immigrants in some states to attain higher education (Abrego 2018), while others cannot overcome structural barriers in anti-immigrant policy contexts (Roth 2017, Salazar 2024). As Smith (2024) documents in his decades-long ethnography and longitudinal interviews with Mexican immigrants in New York, caring for and socializing children in healthy ways requires hope for a future of opportunity. This is made more difficult when federal immigration policies prevent children of immigrants from going to college, even in pro-immigrant states (Smith 2024). Through surveys and in-depth interviews, scholars find that those children of immigrants who do get to attend college are still impacted by the fear of family separation, even when they feel protected on campus (Enriquez & Millán 2021).

Harsh immigration policies are also affecting children in K–12 schools. In 2017–2018, education scholars conducted surveys with 3,650 public school teachers across the country and found that as children struggle to focus under the ubiquitous threat of enforcement and educators struggle to teach in environments of fear and stress, enforcement negatively impacts students' attendance, graduation rates, and educational aspirations (Ee & Gándara 2020). Teachers observe that immigration enforcement is affecting all students, immigrants and US-born. Empty seats in the classroom are reminders to all students of missing classmates. This knowledge increases fears and disrupts learning and school routines (Ee & Gándara 2020). In another study, using survey data with more than 700 middle school students in Arizona, scholars found that even when an anti-immigrant law was never fully implemented, simple awareness of the law and its potential consequences was enough to lead to a rise in behavioral problems in the classroom among both immigrant and nonimmigrant students (Santos et al. 2018). Following these findings, further research is needed to understand the long-term consequences of immigration laws for entire families and perhaps entire communities.

Physical and Mental Health

Feeling like they always have to watch their backs, immigrant families often navigate daily life under great duress that, over time, can lead to declining health. Using quantitative research methods, health science scholars resoundingly confirm that immigration status is a social determinant of health, emphasizing the effects of immigration status stressors on health disparities (Perreira & Pedroza 2019, Saadi et al. 2020, Vargas et al. 2017). Scholars find that mental and emotional health concerns are prevalent among undocumented and mixed-status families (Hainmueller et al. 2017), with children and youth experiencing heightened risks associated with their development. Public policy scholar Cecilia Ayón and her team (Ayón et al. 2020) used community-based participatory methods and interviews to examine Latine undocumented older adults' experiences with health care. They found that many undocumented older adults showed great resilience in maintaining their health when they could not access medical attention. Importantly, despite their best efforts, an inability to seek formal health care created additional stressors for family members caring economically and emotionally for vulnerable elders.

Ethnographic, participatory, and interview methods are especially useful in locating the mistrust of health care institutions that arises when undocumented and mixed-status families face barriers based on cost, insurance, language, cultural norms, and discrimination (Farfán-Santos 2022, Van Natta 2023, Vang 2018). Conditions are especially dire in states and local areas with anti-immigrant legislation (Vargas et al. 2017), or in rural areas with limited social and healthcare infrastructure (Gómez Cervantes & Menjívar 2020). The racialization of legal status makes Latine immigrant groups particularly vulnerable to health disparities (Aranda & Vaquera 2015, Van Natta 2023, Vargas & Ybarra 2017), but the distress and anxiety they experience is also evident among poor Asian immigrant families (Fujiwara 2008, Vang 2018, Yellow Horse & Vargas 2022).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, negative health outcomes were prevalent among all immigrant groups, but undocumented and mixed-status families faced added health stressors due to legal vulnerabilities (Garcini et al. 2022). While scholars emphasize family resilience in the face of compounded health and legal vulnerabilities, more research is needed to examine how detrimental physical and mental health outcomes will impact future generations.

FAMILY ROLES AND DYNAMICS

Much of the research on the most intimate impacts of immigration law relies on qualitative methods that give immigrants space to reflect on how they feel and make sense of their families' experiences. That scholarship finds that immigration law is so far-reaching that it has the potential to powerfully impact all aspects of family life, including how parents discipline children and how siblings relate to one another. In interviews with children and observations of family interactions, scholars find that when US citizen children in mixed-status families have greater protections and access to resources, parents can better support their interests (Dreby 2015, Mangual Figueroa 2012). In interviews with young adult children, undocumented siblings express that they felt pained and neglected by the stratified care they experienced from parents (Menjívar & Abrego 2009). Thus, immigration laws heavily mark family life, but because they do so in ways that are invisible as people interact with one another, the harm is experienced as simply intimate and interpersonal, with long-lasting emotional consequences (Abrego 2014). Making the law and its consequences visible is one of the contributions of this research, and law and society frameworks have been helpful in capturing the legal violence (Menjívar & Abrego 2012) and the legal consciousness of members of immigrant families (Abrego 2016, 2019; Tenorio 2024).

Qualitative work also reveals how immigration policy shapes the most intimate aspects of family formation, including dating, marriage, and parenting (Cebulko 2016, Enriquez 2020, León 2020, Pila 2016). Interviews with undocumented young adults reveal that socialization in the United States is informed by gendered expectations and norms such that undocumented men with limited employment opportunities are unable to fulfill their roles as economic providers during courtship, in their marital relationships, or as fathers (Enriquez 2020, Pila 2016). Women, on the other hand, worry about disclosing their immigration status during courtship (Pila 2016) and as they consider shifting gendered expectations as girlfriends and wives into motherhood (Enriquez 2020). When making decisions about whether to marry, along with the usual considerations about family pressures and personal, academic, and career goals, undocumented immigrants also have to bear the weight of immigration law in their romantic relationships. Through interviews with undocumented immigrants in mixed-status partnerships, León (2020) finds that these couples are especially taxed by having to negotiate competing mainstream US social and cultural norms: one that frames marriage as solely for love and companionship and the other that suggests marriage is an easy utilitarian pathway toward legalization. The immigration system requires them to prove that their marriages are for love and not for legalization, forcing them to enact expectations that can feel inauthentic. This is uniquely stressful during the high-stakes interviews with immigration authorities who have the discretionary power to either allow them to remain together in the United States or accuse them of marriage fraud and separate them through deportation (León 2020).

Changes in marriage and immigration laws can further expand or constrict immigrants' family formation processes, including decisions of who one should fall in love with and whether to remain together. The 2013 legal recognition of same-sex marriages with the overturning of the 1996 Defense of Marriage Act gave LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning) mixed-status families new rights, including increased access to legalization through marriage

(Luibhéid & Chávez 2021). Using quantitative methods, scholars find that during heightened periods of immigration enforcement, marriage to native-born individuals increases for immigrant men and women (Amuedo-Dorantes et al. 2020). And yet, as interviews with mixed-status couples reveal, with increasing economic and legal barriers to legalization, marriage to a US citizen or resident is not an automatic qualifier for residency (Gomberg-Muñoz 2016). Such policy impacts on marriage patterns can have long-term implications for family formation and could have spillover effects to other family experiences, including investments in housing, childbearing, and labor market participation.

IMPACTS OF IMMIGRATION LAWS ON MIGRANT FAMILIES AIMING TO REACH THE UNITED STATES

Beyond examining the effects of immigration policies on families in the United States, we call for an expanded focus to consider how US policies profoundly structure the migration journey and the border experiences of today's migrants, with lasting consequences for families. US foreign policies displace people into migration while immigration policies categorize them into unstable legal statuses that are cumulatively consequential for immigrant families (Menjívar & Abrego 2024). Scholars around the world have documented how US global economic practices, for example, allow for the direct recruitment of migrants from some regions and professions (Choy 2003, Espiritu 2002, Kim 2008, Reddy 2015), while they destabilize other regions, forcing migrants to seek survival in the United States (Batz 2020, Espiritu 2014, Fernández-Kelly & Massey 2007, Loperena 2017, Menjívar & Abrego 2024, Vang 2020). When people flee, they face a complex immigration regime that makes safe, affordable, and efficient legal migration a rarity, especially when families wish to remain intact through the migration process (Fowler 2022, Hsin & Aptekar 2022, Menjívar & Abrego 2012).

US immigration policy begins to shape migrant experiences even before migrants arrive on US territory. Prevention Through Deterrence (PTD), the official US border policy since 1994 when it was implemented by the Clinton administration, relies on hypersecurity measures to redirect migrant routes away from urban ports of entry and into hostile terrain along the border. In cases like these, immigration policies are so inhumane that the work of immigration scholars is to translate legalese and bring harmful consequences more clearly into view. Anthropologists and sociologists have extensively documented that PTD's goals were to make it so difficult to survive that it would deter migrants from trying to cross (De León 2015, FitzGerald 2019). Policymakers correctly predicted that migrants would experience exhaustion, hunger, hypothermia, chronic heat exposure, dehydration, snake bites, and many other physical injuries during crossings (De León 2015). PTD also added Border Patrol agents at more border checkpoints, uses military technology to detect migrants, and calls for a higher border wall. But border crossings continue and have only become more deadly. Between 1998 and 2019, 7,805 migrants were officially reported dead along the southwest border (Hum. Rights Watch & Colibrí Cent. Hum. Rights 2024), but based on the sheer volume of requests they process and the number of remains they find, leading humanitarian organizations in the region believe the number of border crossers who have perished or disappeared in the desert is likely closer to 80,000 (No More Deaths & Coalición de Derechos Humanos 2021).

Despite such unnecessarily cruel enforcement tactics, conditions in migrants' homelands are such that hundreds of thousands continue to migrate. In response, the US government is funding an externalization (an expansion to other countries of the same military tactics through funding and training) of its PTD policies meant to keep migrants from reaching the United States (Digidiki & Bhabha 2021). Social scientists are documenting the results in Mexico and Central America:

Migration routes are more perilous over a greater stretch of land at a time when migration is high throughout the region (Muñoz-Pogossian & Chaves-González 2023). Sometimes partnering with nonprofit and charity organizations on the trails, scholars conduct interviews with migrants in transit to capture the increased risks of these policies. Migrants, especially women and children, are made more vulnerable targets for drug cartels, police, and immigration agents' violence. Every year, researchers document more incidents of sexual assault, kidnapping, extortion, loss of limbs, and loss of life for poor and racialized unauthorized migrants who do not qualify for US immigrant visas (Aguayo Quezada & Ramírez González 2022, Brigden 2018, De León 2024, Izcarra Palacios 2016, Vega Arriola 2024). This ramped up Mexican immigration regime forces many migrants to settle precariously in Mexico, where anthropologists document how much they struggle to provide for their families (Frank-Vitale 2020, Julien 2019, Serra Mingot & González Zepeda 2023).

In the face of policy-driven dangers, migrant families would, of course, prefer to qualify for an immigrant visa, board a plane together, and land safely at their US destination within hours. But only the privileged have this option (Abrego 2014). Most migrants risk their lives on journeys that can last weeks, months, or years. To increase their chances of success, some migrants hire smugglers, or guides, who know the routes. Given the dire need and the illicit context produced by US immigration laws and their externalization (Acevedo & Richards 2024, FitzGerald 2019), the cost of these guides is exorbitant—up to several tens of thousands of US dollars, depending on the distance and type of service offered (Leyva-Flores et al. 2019, Zhang 2007). Importantly, this strategy does not guarantee migrants' safety, as scholars have documented through ethnographic observation and interviews with migrants and guides that sometimes the guides themselves extort, rape, and traffic migrants (De León 2024, Martínez 2013, Zhang & Chin 2001). Surveys and interviews with migrants reveal that whether they make it to their desired destination or not, they accrue enormous debt that increases their likelihood of being forced into exploitative working conditions while in transit (Izcarra Palacios 2016) or upon reaching the United States (Abrego 2014). Exploitation, in turn, decreases their chances of providing the kind of care and resources they had hoped for their families.

PTD purposely causes tragic and unnecessary harm. Behavioral scientists have conducted qualitative survey research with immigrants released from detention and found that even when migrants arrive in the United States, they and their families will have to grapple with the economic, physical, emotional, and psychological toll of their clandestine journeys (O'Connor et al. 2015, Perreira & Ornelas 2013). They have learned that, having perhaps experienced or witnessed unspeakable violence while in transit and typically without the opportunity to process those experiences in supportive spaces, some migrants will develop post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, sleep disturbances, difficulty concentrating, and other mental health problems (Rios Casas et al. 2020). Such unwellness, in turn, can inhibit their ability to communicate with, care for, and bond with family (Abrego 2014). Centering ethical research practices, scholars can play a role in documenting how these policy-induced migration traumas inform family well-being throughout immigrants' life courses.

Policies at the Border

Fleeing dire conditions, and unable to easily enter the United States, many people want to turn themselves in at official ports of entry to apply for asylum (Am. Immigr. Coun. 2024a). They have the right to do so, as designated by the United Nations 1951 Convention, its 1967 Protocol, and the US Refugee Act of 1980. Asylum, like refugee status, is a form of legal protection available to people who flee their countries due to fear of persecution based on membership in a particular social group, race, or religion. Those granted asylum are authorized to remain in the United States, access a work permit, and become eligible to apply for legal permanent residency within

one year, after which they can apply for US citizenship four years later. They can petition for family members to join them in the United States, and they have access to some government assistance programs. According to international and US immigration laws, asylum seekers should be allowed to turn themselves in, provide evidence of persecution in a “fear interview” with an asylum officer, and, if eligible, begin the process of formally applying for asylum. Asylum seekers at the United States–Mexico border should be released into the United States, with protections from deportation until an outcome is determined later in immigration court. In practice, however, scholars reveal that the process to qualify for asylum is complicated and discretionary, with rules that change frequently, making it difficult to win asylum (Galli 2023).

The process and timeline for asylum seekers vary widely depending on factors like the presidential administration in power, US diplomatic relations with their country, and the volume of asylum applications. In the twenty-first century, as Central American, African, and Caribbean countries witnessed unbearable levels of crime, dispossession, and need, legal scholars and social scientists documented the policies delimiting options for individuals and entire families as they migrated together toward the United States (Fowler 2022, Serra Mingot & González Zepeda 2023). Scholars are playing an important role in shedding light on the recent border policies that have made it newly possible to separate children from guardians, regulate migrants’ access to border agents, and close the border almost completely. At the same time, historians and legal scholars note the historical and contemporary racialized hierarchies of compassion that offer preferential treatment when they are more likely to welcome White refugees or those who serve US geopolitical interests (Casavantes Bradford 2022, Sajjad 2022). Border Patrol and ORR data confirm that while negatively racialized asylum seekers like Haitians and Maya migrants from Guatemala have been summarily deported, detained, and sometimes separated from loved ones (Amuedo-Dorantes & Bucheli 2024), Ukrainians and Venezuelans are significantly more likely to be admitted into the United States to await the adjudication of their asylum case (US Dep. Justice 2023).

In 2018, the Trump administration’s ZTBP prosecuted every adult apprehended at the border and processed them through ICE, even if they were lawfully seeking asylum. If migrants were traveling with children, these were designated as smuggling cases, and children were taken to be processed separately through the ORR (Kelly 2018). Without a central plan to reunite these families, upwards of 3,000 children were separated from their parents for months or, in some cases, years (Abrego 2023). It has taken the work of investigative journalists and scholars to unearth many of the facts. During their separation, children were reclassified as unaccompanied minors and held under federal custody, in detention centers under jail-like conditions or in makeshift tent cities on military bases in places like Texas and Florida (Amuedo-Dorantes & Bucheli 2024). In detention centers, where some children had been held for as long as six years, officials forcibly held the minors down and administered powerful psychotropic drugs to stop them from crying (Bogado 2020). Notably, as many as 96% of the families impacted by this policy were from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador (ACLU 2018)—all countries that have been deeply harmed by US foreign policies and whose people are negatively racialized in the United States (Abrego & Villalpando 2021, Amuedo-Dorantes & Bucheli 2024, Menjívar & Abrego 2024). Whether these migrants are allowed to remain in the United States or deported to their countries of origin, more research is needed to understand the consequences of these forced separations, as they are likely to shape these families throughout their lives.

Widespread protest and legal push-back to this formal policy of family separation moved the Trump and later the Biden administrations to rely more heavily on other policies to illegally block asylum seekers from entering the United States. Between 2018 and 2021, they expanded an Obama-era practice known as metering, in which US Customs and Border Protection limits the number of people who can apply for asylum at ports of entry (Amuedo-Dorantes & Bucheli

2023). In 2019, they established the Migrant Protection Protocol, commonly known as the Remain in Mexico Program, in which they forced asylum seekers to await their hearings in Mexico. Having put their names on the metering list, asylum-seeking families and individuals were required to wait in makeshift camps along the border in Mexico, where many languished for months in severely unprotected and unsanitary conditions (Hernandez-Arriaga & Argenal 2023), even as Ukrainians and their pets were allowed through the border (Laurel 2022). The formal adjudication process can take more than two years, and by then, children and adults are likely to have witnessed and experienced various forms of traumatizing violence, including kidnapping, rape, and murder (Leutert 2021). During the COVID-19 pandemic, moreover, the Trump administration implemented the Title 42 public health order that effectively closed the border to all but a few asylum seekers. Despite the Biden administration's initial attempt to end the Migrant Protection Protocol and Title 42, these programs were held up in court and later implemented under a new border management plan known as the asylum transit ban. Together, these policies continue to harm thousands of asylum-seeking families who are forced to remain on the Mexican side of the border as they await a chance to be seen by an asylum officer, then a chance to apply for asylum, and finally, a decision on their case (Fowler 2022). Scholars must be rigorous in unearthing these policies, and they have an opportunity to better connect the dots about how border policies shape racialized immigrant families' lives long-term.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

While much existing scholarship underscores the wide-ranging and far-reaching impacts of immigration law in immigrant families' lives, we do not want to suggest that immigrants do not have agency or that they are incapable of thriving. In fact, qualitative work with immigrant families reveals that they have a long history of mutual support to help one another survive and thrive, particularly in the face of such extensive structural barriers (Arce et al. 2020, Ayón et al. 2020, Farfán-Santos 2021, Hernandez-Arriaga & Argenal 2023, Menjívar 2002, Salazar 2024). Policy and practice recommendations in the scholarship we reviewed suggest that educators, health practitioners, and extended networks of support can familiarize themselves with immigration policies to provide essential information to best support immigrant families. We appreciate the research that recognizes immigrant families' and communities' resilience in the face of so much hardship, and we also encourage scholars to be mindful that ultimately, these are structural problems, and therefore the biggest improvements will come with comprehensive changes to immigration law. Even small changes in policies at the federal, state, or local levels can lead to notable improvements in immigrants' lives because even when only one family member can access new benefits, like a driver's license or a higher-paying job, they share the benefits with their loved ones (Abrego 2018). Such material improvements are well documented with the signing of the DACA Executive Order (Gonzales et al. 2017) and with state bills making drivers' licenses available to undocumented immigrants (Cade 2024). Benefits are also health related and intergenerational, as survey research finds that DACA eligibility for mothers decreased anxiety disorders among their children (Hainmueller et al. 2017).

Taking seriously the US government's proclaimed commitment to the well-being of immigrant families, research should continue to examine complex immigration policies and the mechanisms that can disempower families and make them vulnerable, unable to live together and in peace (Gash & Yamin 2019). As federal, state, and local laws continue to change rapidly under new presidential and gubernatorial administrations, each change and the way it is covered in the media adds to the confusion and uncertainty that plague immigrant families. Meanwhile, immigrant families suffer grave consequences, with harms that will potentially last throughout their lifetimes. Research using quantitative methods is helpful in capturing the macrolevel trends and causal

relationships between policy changes and family behaviors, while qualitative studies get us closer to immigrants' meaning-making processes.

It is worth underscoring that, given the sensitive nature of accessing information from such a vulnerable community, scholars in the field who employ longitudinal and qualitative approaches practice deep ethical commitments to the families and communities they study and embed themselves holistically through approaches that account for migrants' lives more fully (Ayón et al. 2020, Dreby 2015, Menjívar & Abrego 2012, Schmalzbauer 2014, Smith 2024). Given the ways immigration laws make immigrant families vulnerable, we echo the call of immigrant scholars for future work to be guided by ethical commitments that require ethical data collection processes while engaging responsibly with participants to prioritize their care and minimize harm (León et al. 2025). This means, in part, that when immigration scholars make policy recommendations, they should avoid reinforcing notions of deservingness that tend to center only the US citizen members of these families. Even though calls to protect US citizen children or spouses of undocumented immigrants are well-intentioned, they uphold the idea that US citizenship makes people inherently more valuable. Finally, comprehensive analysis of immigrant families will also need to recognize that legalization alone will not solve all the problems we have enumerated in this review. Poverty, racialization, criminalization, and patriarchy, among other systemic factors, also determine immigrant families' life chances.

Migration will continue. Immigrant parents will make sacrifices for the possibility of seeing their children access new resources, learn new skills, and achieve educational and professional success (Abrego 2018, Rios Casas et al. 2020). Even in the most dire conditions, forced into unprotected tents to live on the street for months at a time while they await a slim possibility of being allowed to apply for asylum, migrant families will do their best to support one another and work to create whatever sense of safety and stability they can muster for their children (Hernandez-Arriaga & Argenal 2023). These processes and forms of resilience, too, merit scholarly attention.

Ultimately, we encourage migration scholars to center their studies of policy consequences on immigrant families. How are they understanding immigration laws? How does their understanding, whether technically correct or not, shape their lived experiences within their most intimate relationships? Even if families currently reside together in the United States, have they previously been separated? If so, for how long? How does that separation inform their ongoing relationships? Do they live with fear of separation? When and how does that fear inform their behaviors? How do they communicate with one another and express their love despite the long-lasting consequences of family separation due to immigration policies? To tell more comprehensive stories of the impact of US immigration policies, scholars also need to look beyond US borders to understand what migrants risked to get here, how long their journeys were, and how they make sense of their presence in the United States after the potential trauma of unauthorized migration. Given how deeply consequential immigration policies are for families, scholars have ample opportunity to document and theorize the frequent policy changes and their impacts on families and, by extension, on US society long-term.

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