

# Documentation status socialization among Latinx immigrant parents

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## Abstract

Discriminatory legislation targeting Latinx immigrants in the United States has shifted how parents communicate with their children about the hostile political climate. One way that Latinx parents talk about and prepare their children to face prejudice is through ethnic-racial socialization, which can promote children's positive development. Few scholars, however, have focused on how Latinx immigrant families with precarious documentation status socialize their children around issues of immigration, documentation status, and the potential for family separation. The current study seeks to broaden our understanding and conceptualization of ethnic-racial socialization practices among Latinx immigrant families living in the United States to include documentation status socialization to better capture the messages parents transmit to their children about the causes and potential impacts of their documentation status. Thirty-nine Latinx immigrant mothers aged 35–53 ( $M = 41.66$ ), (22 undocumented, 17 documented) were interviewed regarding the ways in which their documentation status informs their ethnic-racial socialization practices. Five subthemes of *Documentation Status Socialization* were identified among both undocumented and documented parents. Example of subthemes included *Limitations and Restrictions of Undocumented Status*, and *Documentation Privilege*, in which parents discussed the limitation of being undocumented as well as the privilege that comes with the legal documentation status with

their youth. Our findings yield important implications for practice and research alike.

**KEYWORDS**

documentation status socialization, ethnic-racial socialization, Latinx immigrants, mixed-status families, undocumented immigrants

**1 |**

A common response to racism and xenophobia among parents of color is to prepare their children to respond to future experiences of discrimination while also counterbalancing negative societal messages with those of cultural and ethnic pride; this array of practices is known as ethnic-racial socialization (ERS) (Hughes et al., 2006; Umaña-Taylor & Hill, 2020). Despite the fact that the perpetuation of state violence (e.g., by law enforcement) constitutes a method of demeaning, criminalizing, and abusing Latinxs, particularly those with precarious documentation status, few scholars have included the ways in which Latinx immigrant families socialize their children around issues of immigration, documentation status, and the potential for family separation as part of their ERS repertoire (Ayón et al., 2019; Cross et al., 2020). Accordingly, it is less clear how such processes manifest among Latinx immigrants who are undocumented and how having documented status may shape the socialization of Latinx parents. Thus, the current study seeks to explore the documentation status socialization of documented and undocumented Latinx parents. We define *documentation status socialization* as the messages and behaviors aimed to teach children about issues related to documentation status and prepare them to encounter hostile interactions and individuals. Studies have found that for Latinx youth, such discussions have the potential to impact adolescents' awareness of societal inequities as well as their future civic dispositions (Pinetta et al., 2020). As such, we sought to broaden the current conceptualization of ERS to include an under-examined aspect of the lived experiences of Latinx immigrant parents raising children in the United States.

**1.1 | Theoretical frameworks**

We draw from the integrative model for the study of developmental competencies in minority children (García-Coll et al., 1996) as a framework to guide the present study. The integrative model facilitates our understanding of the ways in which social position factors (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender) affect the development of youth of color. The model posits that the adaptive cultural processes of communities of color help to diminish the harm caused by pervasive systems of oppression such as racism, prejudice, and discrimination, that mediate the effects of social position factors on the development of children and youth of color. Furthermore, when considering Latinxs in rural or new immigrant destinations, their foreign, migrant, and undocumented statuses are salient social position factors through which mixed status communities can experience systems of oppression (Cross et al., 2020; Stein et al., 2016). The current study argues that documentation status socialization is an adaptive cultural process utilized by Latinx individuals, especially those whose undocumented status and social position places them at the forefront of immigration related persecution.

Additionally, we look to the legal violence framework (Menjívar & Abrego, 2012) to better understand the crosshairs of immigration laws and enforcement agencies with the lived experiences of Latinx communities of mixed documentation status. Menjívar and Abrego (2012) define legal violence as the current and increasingly arbitrary entanglement of criminal and immigration law, drawing particular attention to the normalized forms of violence that are inherent to the implementation of such laws. Lopez (2020) argues that when local police departments cooperate with and facilitate traumatic Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)<sup>1</sup> raids, criminal and immigration laws become a unified perpetrator of terror against communities that include both documented and undocumented individuals. Juxtaposing the legal violence and integrative child development frameworks, we provide an expanded conceptualization of Latinx parents' ERS practices by arguing that the documentation status socialization practices of Latinx parents can be understood as an adaptive cultural process enacted to shield Latinx youth from the potential threat of immigration-related terror and trauma at the hands of US legal systems.

## 1.2 | Restrictive sociopolitical climate

The United States has become increasingly hostile toward immigrants in the last decades (Capps et al., 2018; Gonzalez-Barrera & Krogstad, 2020), placing mixed status families, which include both documented and undocumented individuals, at higher risk for experiencing xenophobia and racial profiling by state and federal agencies. However, to have a more complete understanding of how the current sociopolitical context affects the ways that Latinx parent socialize their children, parents' messages about documentation status should be understood against the backdrop of increasing criminalization of immigration from Latin America and immigrants, more generally. Although the Trump administration (2016–2020) has been the most openly hostile toward immigrants, especially undocumented immigrants, it is important to note the role that previous administrations played in setting the stage for the current anti-immigrant sentiment.

During the Bush Administration (2001–2009), national perspectives on immigration shifted from being a resource for accessing cheap labor to immigration being viewed as an inherently criminal act perpetrated by foreigners who were depicted as violent threats. This shift occurred largely in response to the 9/11 Terrorist Attacks and as a way to gain support for federal initiatives to tighten security efforts at the US–Mexico border (Lopez, 2020). This trend continued through the Obama administration and it was responsible for many family separations through deportations. In fact, at the end of his tenure, the Obama administration had the highest record of immigration removals when compared to the previous administrations, which earned him the title of “deporter-in-chief” by immigrant rights activists (Chishti et al., 2017). However, the Obama administration focused on detaining recently arrived individuals with unauthorized documentation status and most of those cases were treated as civil immigration matters (Chishti et al., 2017). The Trump administration (2016–2020), by contrast, focused on deporting individuals who had resided in the United States for over 15 years and had established themselves as productive members of their communities. Furthermore, their cases were treated as criminal matters, allowing the government to prosecute individuals as perpetrators of felonies and misdemeanors (Gramlich, 2020). This key difference has played a major role in the criminalization of immigrants because it adds an additional layer of incarceration before deportation.

Furthermore, through restrictive legislation and large-scale workplace ICE raids that take place in collaboration with local law enforcement, states enact harm against Latinx immigrants and impact the positive development and emotional wellbeing of Latinx children, youth, and adults who compose mixed-status families (Brown et al., 2020).

Legislation passed within the last few decades legitimizes the discrimination of undocumented individuals, making it difficult for Latinx immigrants not only to obtain legal status but also to access state and community resources, creating fear and mistrust within mixed-status communities (Lovato et al., 2018; Perreira & Pedroza, 2019). Additionally, members of mixed status families have to deal with the risk of being traumatically separated from their children as they go to work on a day that is “*común y corriente*” (i.e., typical; Lopez, 2020). For Latinx children and youth living with the fear of being separated from their parents, the developmental and educational impacts can be severe (Cross et al., 2020). Living in fear and having to navigate policies that require social security numbers to access public benefits restrict access to resources of the US-born children of undocumented parents, and of families who are wary of state and federal support agencies due to the precarious documentation status of someone else in their family or community.

### 1.3 | Where does documentation status socialization fit into ethnic-racial socialization?

#### 1.3.1 | Ethnic-racial socialization

One way that Latinx immigrant parents provide counternarratives to their children and adolescents is through their ethnic-racial socialization (ERS; Hughes et al., 2006). ERS is a multi-layered construct that aims to capture the ways in which parents convey messages surrounding pride and heritage as well as preparing youth to cope with systemic and interpersonal systems of oppression and discrimination (Huguley et al., 2019; Umaña-Taylor & Hill, 2020). The four more widely studied dimensions of ERS practices are cultural socialization, preparation for bias, promotion of mistrust, and egalitarianism (Hughes et al., 2006). Cultural socialization refers to the transmissions of cultural traditions, norms, events, values, and important historical figures (Huguley et al., 2019). Preparation for bias refers to the ways that parents teach youth to expect and cope with instances of prejudice and discrimination (Hughes et al., 2006). Promotion of mistrust encompasses parental encouragement of mistrust toward outgroup members in personal and institutional settings (Huguley et al., 2019). Finally, egalitarianism refers to parents' explicit messages prioritizing individual qualities over racial group membership or to parents' avoidance of discussing race-related issues with their youth (Hughes et al., 2006).

Within Latinx communities, cultural socialization is the most commonly utilized ERS dimension, and it has been positively associated with academic adjustment, adaptive coping, psychological adjustment, positive self-esteem and ethnic-racial identities (Umaña-Taylor & Hill, 2020). The findings regarding preparation for bias have been less clear, with studies not finding any associations between preparation for bias and youth adjustment, both negative and positive associations between preparation for bias and ethnic-racial identity and educational and health outcomes, as well as positive associations with depressive symptoms in youth (Huguley et al., 2019; Umaña-Taylor & Hill, 2020). Promotion of mistrust messages are less frequently used by parents of color and have been associated with more negative outcomes, such as increased depression in youth, lower academic outcomes, lower self-esteem and less prosocial behaviors (Cross et al., 2020; Huguley et al., 2019; Umaña-Taylor & Hill, 2020). Finally, egalitarianism is also one of the least common dimensions of ERS practices and few studies have examined the effects of egalitarianism on youth outcomes. Those that have, however, have also found mixed results with some linking egalitarianism to positive youth adjustment and higher academic expectations among youth of color, while others have found negative associations with psychoeducational outcomes (see Huguley et al., 2019 for a review).

### 1.3.2 | Documentation status socialization

In an effort toward incorporating the broad experiences of Latinx immigrant families in the ERS literature, we consider documentation status socialization as an important ERS dimension (Cross, *in press*). We define documentation status socialization as the messages that Latinx parents convey to their youth about the precarious nature of being undocumented or belonging to a mixed documentation status family or community. This can include the ways in which Latinx immigrant parents try to shield and protect their children by withholding the undocumented status of members of the family in order to prevent distress to their youth (Balderas et al., 2016). Documentation status socialization can also include direct conversations about the potential for family separations through deportation (Lykes et al., 2013). The purpose of such conversations can be to comfort youth, to try to relieve some of their fears regarding family separations and can also include creating an action plan in case of deportation (Ayón, 2016). Additionally, conversations with youth can also be meant to educate them about their own nativity and documentation status and rights that the youth are entitled to as US Citizens (Ayón, 2016; García, 2019). Similar to preparation for bias, conversations regarding documentation status and family deportation are likely to be reactive, prompted by external events or questionings stemming from the youth. They can also be proactive, as a way for parents to prepare their adolescents to cope with the current anti-immigrant sentiment in the United States (García, 2019, Hughes et al., 2006).

Given the contentious political climate of the United States, increased immigration activity targeting Latinx individuals, and the constant threat of family separation, detainment, and deportation, it has become ever more necessary for scholars to better understand the ways that Latinx families are socializing their youth surrounding documentation status issues. Researchers focusing on the ERS practices of parents of color must have a nuanced understanding of the unique barriers mixed documentation status families face and the different approaches they take to addressing or bypassing those barriers. Such an understanding would enable scholars and practitioners alike to advocate for and provide resources that are tailored to the needs of (and will better serve) mixed-status communities (Ayón et al., 2019). For instance, Cross et al. (2020) found that the ways that parents helped their children cope with racism and discrimination and the tools used to pass on heritage traditions and values differed based on the parent's documentation status; such that undocumented parents were more likely to tell kids to ignore experiences of discrimination, while documented parents were more likely to encourage youth to defend themselves. Also, the documented parents were able to take their youth on trips to their home country as part of their cultural socialization, whereas undocumented parents had to rely more on anecdotal experiences and teaching their kids about their cultural traditions. Exploring Latinx parents' ERS practices that more deeply tap into their lived experiences and their motivation for sharing those messages with their children will allow for better-tailored resources that parents can use to engage in these conversations with their youth.

### 1.3.3 | Documentation status and ethnic-racial socialization

Although ERS practices have been proven to be effective in counteracting the detrimental effects of racism and xenophobia in youth of color (Huguley, 2019; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2020) there are key aspects pertaining to mixed status and undocumented families that are not being captured in traditional ERS measures. As mentioned above, the tools utilized by parents to teach their children about their heritage cultures and traditions differ depending on parents' documentation status. Similarly, when it comes to preparation for bias

messages, undocumented parents may find themselves discouraging their children from reacting to discriminatory experiences. In particular, studies find that undocumented parents are fearful of telling their child to stand up for themselves for fear that it will place them at greater risk of being exposed as being undocumented (Ayón, 2016; Cross et al., 2020). Furthermore, promotion of mistrust messages requires a more nuanced examination given the passing of more restrictive legislation. Considering their precarious documentation status, undocumented and mixed status families may be weary of utilizing social and community services that may require proof of citizenship or a government approved identification. For example, parents may discourage their children from applying for financial aid through the Free Application for Federal Aid (FAFSA) benefits as they undergo the college application process. Therefore, incorporating documentation status socialization under the umbrella of ERS practices is necessary as current understandings of traditional ERS practices do not fully capture the intricacies of the undocumented or mixed status community experiences.

## 1.4 | The current study

The main goal of the present study is to expand current understandings of ERS practices of Latinx parents to include documentation status socialization as an important ERS dimension for these families. Past ERS studies have indicated that Latinx undocumented parents differ in their ERS practices and approach to discussing immigration-related issues with their youth (Ayón, 2016; Cross et al., 2020). Furthermore, previous research also indicates that the heightened anti-immigrant sentiment and public rhetoric that resulted from the presidential campaign and election of US President Trump (2016–2020) has prompted difficult conversations regarding the threat of family separations amongst mixed status Latinx families (Ayón, 2016; Balderas et al., 2016; García, 2019). Given that such separations affect entire communities (Lopez, 2020), drawing from qualitative interviews, we explored how documented and undocumented parents engage in *documentation status socialization* as part of their ERS, and whether there were differences in the nature of their practices.

## 2 | METHOD

### 2.1 | Participants

This qualitative study relied on a subsample of participants from a longitudinal mixed-method project with Latinx families living in southeast Michigan (HUM00083246). One hundred and fifteen Latinx parents were surveyed as part of the third wave of quantitative data collection. Our goal was to invite 40 of those parents to be interviewed. Due to eligibility issues, one of the interviews we conducted could not be included in the analysis. Thus, a total of 39 semi-structured interviews with foreign-born participants were analyzed. All of the interviewees were mothers aged 35–53 ( $M = 41.66$ ,  $SD = 6.53$ ) and had adolescent children between the ages of 14–17 ( $M = 15.72$ ,  $SD = .58$ ). The large majority of teens were US-born (82%). Most participants were married (80%), 69% were of Mexican origin and the remaining were from Central and South American countries. Seventy-four percent of participants had a high school diploma or lower, 13% attended some college, 5% had a 2-year college degree, 5% had an advanced degree and the rest did not answer this question. Thirty-four parents reported that their children qualified for free or reduced-price lunch at school. Twenty-two interviewees were undocumented while 17 were documented. Mothers had an average of 16.6 years residing in the United States ( $SD = 5$ , range = 5–26).

## 2.2 | Procedure

Flyers in English and Spanish were distributed across Southeast Michigan in community centers, ethnic markets, and shopping malls. Eligible participants had to identify as Latinx and have children aged 13 or 14 at the start of the longitudinal project. All 39 interviewees had participated in the previous quantitative phases of the study and were invited for interviews on a rolling basis as they completed the final wave of data collection. The only additional requirement for interview eligibility was for participants to be foreign-born. Interviewees were consented in their language of choice (English or Spanish) with the large majority ( $N = 37$ ) choosing Spanish. A Certificate of Confidentiality from the National Institute of Health (NIH) was obtained to protect the privacy of our sample. In addition, no signatures on the consent form were required. Participants indicated their consent by marking *yes* to the question confirming their agreement to being interviewed and audio recorded.

Interviews lasted 30–45 min and were conducted between December 2016 and July 2017, coinciding with US President Trump (2016–2020) election and the first few months of this presidency, which was a time of tremendous vulnerability for the Latinx immigrant community. Participants were interviewed in their homes by the first author, who is a Latinx immigrant with years of experience as a social worker and an advocate for the Latinx immigrant community. The interviewer's insider positioning was balanced by her status as an outsider considering her different documentation status as well as educational and socioeconomic backgrounds. These considerations were always weighted throughout the interview and data analysis phases of the study (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). The interview protocol addressed parents' immigration experiences and whether their documentation status influenced their family's dynamics and practices. A native Spanish speaker transcribed the interviews, which were then translated into English and back-translated into Spanish (Knight et al., 2009).

## 2.3 | Data management and analysis

Inductive analysis was conducted with the goal of identifying themes within the data that allow for a broader understanding of the ERS practices of documented and undocumented Latinx immigrants from their own perspective (Bhattacharya, 2017). We conceptualized documentation status socialization as a more nuanced ERS dimension that taps into the experiences of Latinx immigrants living in the United States, especially those from undocumented and mixed status communities. This included discussions with their children regarding immigration and documentation status issues as well as their experiences raising children in the United States. Data management followed the rigorous and accelerated data reduction (RADaR) technique (Watkins, 2017), which streamlines the analysis process through the organization of interviews in spreadsheets that facilitate revisions and expedite the analyses. The data underwent several phases of analysis with each phase producing more concise tables by excluding data unrelated to the main research question. The analysis team included bilingual and bicultural undergraduate and graduate students who, at first, read and reviewed the transcripts to familiarize themselves with the data adding detailed notes about each segment of data. Next, after removing the passages that did not pertain to the focus of the study, a second round of notetaking took place. At this point, after a number of interviews had been analyzed up to that phase, a database of codes and subcodes was developed based on the team's notes so that the following transcripts would be coded drawing from the database, which was updated as needed throughout the analysis process. Each segment of data was coded based on the content of parental socialization

TABLE 1 Theme documentation status socialization

Subthemes	Quotes
<b>Limitations and Restrictions of Undocumented Status</b>	<i>"Being an [undocumented] immigrant has affected us in that we don't have a license in a lot of places, they have already turned us away at clinics, they have told us that they cannot see your kids, because you don't have a license, an ID from [state]."</i>
<b>Documentation Privilege</b>	<i>"I tell him [son], you can work in a job because you have a social security number...you're going to be able to get your ID, I tell them and in no place are they going to say, oh no this one doesn't work, oh no not this one."</i>
<b>Preparing Children for Possible Parental Deportation and Family Separation</b>	<i>"If something were to happen, because I don't have papers...we prepare ourselves because, I'd have to leave...If something happens, they're not, "Where do I go." No, instead, they'll be aware of the situation, and they can find the solution without the necessity of feeling desperate."</i>
<b>Protected by Faith</b>	<i>"We have instilled faith a lot, that if we're here, it's because God has something big planned for us, and that he is the one who will decide."</i>
<b>Border Crossing as a Necessity, not a Crime</b>	<i>"Because we are from Mexico and we need to be legal in this country, and when they ask me how did I come here I explain to them the process, people bringing you for money and that's why we are here. That's why they were born here and they have the right to go and come back but we don't have that and they are sad because they want me to go and I can go but can't come back."</i>

regarding immigration and documentation status reflecting the family's experiences outside of the home (Grinnell & Unrau, 2011). The next phase consisted of clustering the codes into broader categories which allowed for themes to be identified from the data within and across transcripts (Bhattacharya, 2017).

Inter-rater reliability was addressed with RADaR which requires that team members check with one another by comparing their notes and coding, keeping track of disagreements and how they were resolved before moving on to the next phase of the analysis (Watkins, 2017). When disagreements occurred, team members would reread the original interview passage along with their notes, followed by a discussion of their interpretation of participants' response. They would also listen to the original Spanish audio when necessary. On the few occasions that team members could not reach agreement, a different member of the team or the lead author was consulted. This extensive process ensured a rigorous analysis performed with solid communication between partners and discussions at every step of the way. Emerging results were shared with a group of multicultural researchers, not part of the analysis team, at different steps of the analysis. This peer debriefing process afforded important feedback from experts on issues impacting Latinx families in the United States which enhanced the study's validity (Grinnell & Unrau, 2011).

### 3 | RESULTS

An overarching theme focused on *Documentation Status Socialization* was apparent during the analysis. Participants reported talking to their children about the struggles undocumented immigrants face. As summarized in Table 1, two common subthemes were identified among both undocumented and documented parents: (1) *Limitations and Restrictions of Undocumented Status* and (2) *Documentation Privilege*. Other themes pertained only to undocumented parents: (1) *Preparing Children for Possible Parental Deportation and*



*Family Separation, (2) Protected by Faith, and (3) Border Crossing as a Necessity, not a Crime.* Pseudonyms were adopted to protect participants' confidentiality.

### **3.1 | Themes common to both documented and undocumented parents**

#### **3.1.1 | Limitations and restrictions of undocumented status**

Undocumented parents expressed the importance of children learning about parents' undocumented status. Participants explained that they talked increasingly about it as their children aged, but that they were growing up exposed to these stories about immigration and border crossing regardless. Undocumented parents explained that the younger ones understand less about the restrictions and implications than the older children,

When they would ask why we wouldn't take a trip, and why they didn't know their grandparents well...we would always say that we don't have money, we don't have this, we don't have that. But about two years ago they found out the truth that because no, we can't go. (Teresa)

Many undocumented parents believed that their children needed to learn from parents about their realities from the beginning:

I noticed it was important that they understood everything I talked to them about when they were younger because then they ask about this and that, for example, in school they talk to their friends about their fathers being undocumented or having been deported and they start to get curious. I tell them how the situation is so they don't start creating their own conclusions. (Alejandra)

These parents also expressed struggling with telling their undocumented children the truth about the children's own undocumented status as they aged, because the children often believed they were free to work and drive just like their documented (or citizen) peers. One undocumented mother recounted needing to have this conversation with her teenage son when he wanted to get a driver's license, but found he could not due to not having a social security number. These restrictions associated with their documentation status extended to educational opportunities, as college options were often limited due to the unavailability of financial aid or scholarships, making the cost prohibitive. Rosa, an undocumented mother, explained that it was very difficult for the children of undocumented parents to receive financial aid due to their parents' status: "He received invitations from the schools to attend certain programs, but as they [parents] don't have social security he was unable to use it or to apply for it." Most parents said that their undocumented status affected every aspect of their lives and often overshadowed their professional or educational experience. For example, one mother reflected on her family's lack of better employment opportunities in the United States, despite holding degrees in architecture and business. They had to settle for positions unrelated to their professional qualifications.

Parents felt that children needed to know about the restrictions associated with parental undocumented status so that they would understand why they were hesitant to drive, travel, or engage in other seemingly normal activities. For instance, a mother reported telling her children that she was driving without a license so if she happened to make a mistake she could be deported. These conversations were also important to soothe children's fears about parents' possible deportation by letting them know that they were

well prepared even for the worst-case scenario. One mother explained that it was the presence of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in her neighborhood that led her to tell her child that her parents were undocumented. She recounted:

Immigration passed and they stopped, and my daughter started waving at them, and they laughed, and they turned around to look at her, but they didn't wave at her or anything like that, so we told her that she shouldn't do that again. So, we explained to her that in order to be living here we had to be born here or we should have papers allowing us to live here. And she said she was born here but I told her we were not. I told her they could arrest us. (Rosa)

Among documented participants, messages about the struggles undocumented immigrants face and how they are treated were also transmitted through discussions about raids that were happening in their community, current political discourse and the experiences of undocumented family members:

We do know people who are undocumented. And we have to talk to them about it, but sometimes we find out about what happened to a person who got caught by immigration, or classmates of my daughter who was in the school over there, so you always hear those kinds of things. (Alicia)

Over the course of the interviews more than half of the documented participants (9 of 17) disclosed that they had been previously undocumented. Their own experiences as formerly undocumented immigrants were important topics in their conversations with their children to make them aware of how immigrants are treated. These parents stressed to children the importance of uniting and helping other immigrants in the community. Some explained during the interview that the current political climate causes them to feel unsafe and fearful for their vulnerable family members who remain undocumented.

### 3.1.2 | Documentation privilege

Undocumented parents reported teaching their children the difference between being a citizen, being a permanent resident, and being undocumented. They shared with them the restrictions, difficulties and vulnerabilities associated with their undocumented status, as well as the benefits of having documentation, such as being able to travel and having access to health insurance, homeownership, and better educational and career opportunities, among other things. These explanations often happened in the form of comparisons between the parents' and the adolescents' lives and how privileged the children were for their documented status, which was, in many cases, a result of the parents' sacrifice risking their lives coming to this country. As noted by one mother:

That's what really hurts one, is not having papers, because then you cannot find a good job. For everything they ask you for your social security, and then that's when it's hard to find a job, because they want to pay you whatever they'd like. (Sandra)

These parents often expressed feeling vulnerable and equated having documents with enjoying greater respect and safety.

Many passionately expressed that having documents would provide them with more freedom, and with the ability come and go as they pleased. They would not be afraid of

police and could walk with their head held high as their children are often able to do given their US citizenship. Sandra noted again, “If one did have papers it would bring about a very happy life. We would love the town we are in...that is the only difference, it’s a really big difference.” Other undocumented parents were cautious when telling kids about their undocumented status to avoid instilling fear in them about their possible deportation. Some parents also focused on explaining to kids the privilege they have because of the kids’ US citizenship. Undocumented parents agreed that their lives are filled with restrictions and fear, but they strive to teach their US citizen children to value their opportunities and to realize that they can achieve whatever they desire with hard work:

Because we have limitations, limitations on obtaining a driver’s license, limitations on driving, limitations on medical insurance, limitations on other benefits that only citizens and residents can have. I have always told them, “When you are in this country you have no limits, you can do what you want, and as far as you want, you can be a great doctor, a great lawyer or a great president. Whatever you want to do in this country it is available because there are no limits for *you*, but for *us*, yes [there are limits].” (Margarita, emphasis added)

Like the undocumented participants, some of the documented parents spoke with their children about their privilege in having documents. They explained that it provided safety, allowing them to live with less fear and more freedom. These conversations mainly occurred in families where the documented parents used to be undocumented. Parents used their difficult border-crossing experience to make the children appreciate their improved situation as US citizens. They felt it was important for children to acknowledge that, due to their parents’ sacrifice, they now have a better life and a future with more opportunities. Other documented parents, however, explained that the children were aware of the difficulties associated with being undocumented, but they did not fully understand the complexities of the issue. For example, Ana noted that one of her two daughters worked with people who do not speak English:

And they probably don’t have documents to be in this country. So I talk to her and I tell her about the different ways that people can be in the country with documents or no documents, because I don’t think she’s aware of that.

Other parents explained that, as no one in their family was dealing with undocumented status, it was not a topic of conversation at home, and thus they believed their children were mostly unaware of any documentation-related issues. However, the kids could in fact be aware of documentation status issues but unable to talk about it with their parents since there were no discussions about it at home.

## 3.2 | Themes unique to undocumented parents

### 3.2.1 | Preparing children for possible parental deportation and family separation

Undocumented parents felt that it was important to prepare their children for possible parental deportation and family separation. These parents and children reported learning about deportations and family dissolutions in their everyday lives through stories from classmates, neighbors, or acquaintances:

She understands now, because every time we've heard news of someone who was taken, she comes, and she tells me, "Mommy, I have a friend, he told me his parents told him that so-and-so was taken away, that someone was taken." Yes, she saw it on the news. But...I try to not create fear or panic. (Antonia)

Another participant stated directly, "Daughter, you have to be aware that your father or I can be detained at any moment, it is possible that we are going to be in jail or deported" (Margarita). Parents explained that it caused them to live on high alert, fear for their family's future, and develop a contingency plan in case of deportation. They felt it was important to share the plan with their children, even if it caused additional fear and anxiety at first, because it would benefit everyone in the long run to know that there was a plan in place. Juana stated, "If they arrest me, where is my daughter going to stay? You have to have a paper, you have to leave a letter, if you have any properties you have to leave those documents with someone in your family." Margarita reached out to a documented friend for help because "she is legal, and I talked to her and told her that if something happens to us, I'm going to ask her to take care of our children."

Many parents fearing deportation also reported preparing their children for their possible premature adulthood by having to live independently. Children were exposed to financial literacy lessons at home on how to pay bills, save money, and maintain their household. Some undocumented parents were less concerned about being deported, but they wanted to make sure their kids had the tools to maintain ownership of their home. As one parent stated:

I am not worried about that [deportation], but the children, the older ones, the only thing they have to do is support this house because, well, this is where we bought it, and now, they should build it, finish rebuilding it. (Yolanda)

### 3.2.2 | Protected by faith

While preparing children for the worst outcome, parents' faith in God was one of the greatest sources of their strength. Many undocumented participants reported believing that God would protect them from deportation. This faith provided the family with the fortitude to continue moving forward with their lives. One mother reported:

They are scared because they say "Mama, what is going to happen to you?" I tell them, "Nothing is going to happen." In my case, I am not scared, because I grab the hand of God, and I have always had a lot of faith, and I tell them that nothing is going to happen. (Liliana)

Parents also relied on their faith to soothe their worries about President Trump fulfilling his campaign promises to deport undocumented immigrants:

I believe in God, I have the hope and faith in God that everything he [Trump] says...that they won't do it, that what he is talking about they won't be able to do anything because...it doesn't just affect us...it will affect all of the country, because the country depends a lot on all the immigrants that come here to work, because we didn't come here to harm others. We came here to work. (Blanca)

They spoke with certainty in their faith that God would not allow any hardship to come their way, and this feeling helped assuage the family's fears and anxiety.

### 3.2.3 | Border crossing as a necessity, not a crime

Several undocumented participants also explained to their children their view that undocumented immigrants are not criminals. They also reported telling them that arriving to the United States undocumented does not make them inferior to others. They told their children that immigrating to the United States is necessary to provide for one's family, and therefore, they should never judge other undocumented immigrants or view them as inferior. They further taught their children that not all law-breaking behavior should be viewed as bad and that they need to understand the context and hardship they have gone through in pursuit of a better future. They contextualized the xenophobia they were exposed to by stating that "the fact that you don't have any papers doesn't mean that you are a criminal, a murderer, or a thief, but it affects us because of the racists and because of the president" (Lourdes). Another mother passionately pleaded, "I don't have a record; I am a good person, a good citizen. So, it is illegal to be here, but I haven't committed any crimes. I haven't done anything wrong..." (Araceli).

## 4 | DISCUSSION

This study examined the *documentation status socialization* practices of Latinx immigrant parents, and it provided us with a glimpse into their lives and how their marginalization in society impacts the nature of the messages they transmit to their children. The integrative model (García-Coll et al., 1996), which takes into account how cultural, contextual, and structural factors influence family processes, provided an important roadmap to understand how documentation status socialization is an important adaptive cultural process relied upon by undocumented parents. Similarly, the legal violence framework (Menjívar & Abrego, 2012) allowed us to better understand the intersections of living with liminal documentation status during an age of increased criminalization and surveillance of individuals of color. Latinx immigrant parents incorporate documentation status socialization into their ERS as a way to teach their youth how to survive in the midst of more frequent and targeted immigration raids that could potentially lead to detainment and deportation (Ayón, 2016; Cross et al., 2020). As such, documentation status socialization is a clear example of how mixed status communities have adapted their coping mechanisms in light of ICE persecution. Conversations between parents and children about documentation status—the risks, restrictions, possible outcomes, and who is affected by it—were reported by documented and undocumented parents. However, such conversations were prevalent, personal, and urgent in the undocumented group. This included the need to inform children of parents' vulnerable status so as to lessen the surprise in case of detainment and to explain some of the choices made to avoid driving or other activities that might put them at risk. Explaining the restrictions of their status and the ever-present risks involved was important because it also made the children aware that they had a contingency plan for the family in place in case of detainment or deportation. While, according to parents' reports, awareness of the family's vulnerability causes fear and anxiety in children, knowledge of the steps that have been taken to protect the family may ameliorate the terrible fear of deportation for children. By taking these steps, the parents likely felt empowered, that not everything was beyond their control, and that if the worst came to pass, they at least had prepared for it (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2011).

Often witnessed by children, deportations and family separation have become a normal occurrence in many immigrant communities. These events keep immigrants and their children on high alert and afraid for their families' future. Thus, conversations about

documentation status have become more common in these households, especially in reaction to remarks by US President Trump (2016–2020) regarding Mexican and other Latinx immigrants and increased media coverage of raids and family separations (Ayón, 2018). To counteract these negative portrayals, undocumented parents report trying to foster in their children an understanding of what drives immigrants to cross the border so that those actions are not perceived as crimes. These types of conversation are crucial to build and maintain pride toward their ethnic group in their children (Dreby, 2012).

Parents expressed resentment regarding the limitations imposed by their documentation status, which precluded them from taking better jobs for which they were prepared and qualified. These limitations also impacted their children's educational opportunities due to both lack of appropriate parental documentation to apply for loans or scholarships, and the fear of driving or even leaving the house, which prevented them from accepting invitations to visit university campuses. However, when children were given the opportunity to learn about contingency plans their families have developed, they could feel a sense of relief and a measure of control over an otherwise possibly terrible and uncontrollable fate. This awareness could potentially lower children's anxieties regarding not knowing what would happen to them in case of parental detainment and deportation. Moreover, this socialization could help adolescents understand and cope with possible resentment over missed travel opportunities bearing on their educational future. Knowing about an underlying rationale for some of their parents' decisions and behaviors could ameliorate possible family tensions and conflict.

Despite having to live in constant fear of deportation, some undocumented participants had strongly held beliefs that God would protect them from any suffering. Faith lifted the spirits of these families and helped them get on with their lives despite the many risks they faced. Past studies have demonstrated the importance of religion and faith for Latinx immigrants. For many of these individuals, religion is both a central aspect of their culture and an important coping mechanism in the face of stress (Sanchez et al., 2012).

Parents also communicated to children the need for them to assume more mature roles in the home should they be left alone in this country. From learning how to pay bills to lessons on money management and the importance of working hard to provide for the family, parents wanted their teens to be prepared. Developing independence in their maturing children was mentioned as an important goal in preparing them for the possibility of having to assume more adult roles in case of parental deportation.

Documented parents also talked about documentation status issues with their children (see also Ayón, 2018), prompted by the undocumented status of a family member or in response to children witnessing or hearing about deportations or raids in the community. Despite not being personally at risk, some of these parents did not feel completely safe from deportation even with the protections afforded by their permanent residency. In addition, many of the documented participants had undocumented family members and several others had been previously undocumented themselves. They worried and stressed about their own safety or that of their family members in this country, which could be impacting their health. This supports the findings of a previous study which found that merely knowing an undocumented person increases one's risk of mental health problems (Vargas et al., 2018), a risk that extended even to some US citizens. These findings demonstrate the deleterious impact of a person's undocumented status, which can extend far beyond their concerns for their own future in this country.

Some documented parents used their experiences as former undocumented immigrants to make their children aware of the struggles undocumented immigrants face and the need for Latinxs to unite and help one another. Even those parents not directly at risk indicated that the current unsettling political climate increased their feelings of vulnerability. Other

studies have documented the widespread fear that has overtaken the Latinx community in the era of the Trump administration (2016–2020). His xenophobic rhetoric (e.g., “Build the wall”) has created an atmosphere where displays of discrimination against immigrants are more acceptable (Cross et al., 2020; Cross et al. in press, Rodriguez et al., 2019). As a result, besides fearing deportation, some of the undocumented also feared maltreatment and consequently further isolated themselves (Gorman, 2017).

Discussion regarding the privilege of having documents was present in both documented and undocumented households. Documented parents were aware that their children’s understanding of the difficulties of being undocumented was limited. Some felt that talking about it with them was unnecessary, as it did not affect any of them. Others, who had arrived in this country by risking their lives to cross the border and only later became documented, preferred to teach their children that because of their bravery, they were now enjoying a better life. They wanted to ensure that their children were aware of the privilege they have in being documented and of the sacrifices the parents made on their behalf that led to their American citizenship, with all the accompanying benefits. Similarly, the undocumented parents also emphasized to their children their good fortune in being documented. These parents encouraged their children to reach for their dreams and believe that they have the chance to achieve any goals they set because of their American citizenship. There needs to be a better understanding of how having an awareness of their documentation privilege impacts parents and children. Not enough studies have captured these specific types of family conversations and dynamics.

Even though parents participating in this project had adolescent children, some had younger offspring, and they indicated differences in how they approached these topics with the younger ones. Although the undocumented parents felt that the younger children should know about their parents’ status, they shared fewer details with them because they believed them incapable of grasping the concepts of delimiting borders and needing permission to cross from one country into another. While they were aware that their children knew of some issues they faced because of overheard conversations, parents were reluctant to share the realities of detainment and deportation to avoid scaring them. This illustrates the challenges in talking to children about difficult topics in a developmentally appropriate manner (Hughes et al., 2006; Priest et al., 2014). Some of these conversations are often reserved for older children due to parents’ fears of causing younger children stress and worries. However, because of the potential trauma of a parent’s deportation without preparation for possible family separation, many parents do not feel they should keep their children in the dark (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2011).

The practice of separating immigrating families has a very long history in the US (cf. Escobar, 2018), and immigrants’ fear of getting deported and thus separated from their children has led them to adapt their socialization practices to reflect their vulnerable reality. People of Latinx descent are frequently profiled as undocumented, especially those with darker skin and traits perceived to be Mexican (Araújo & Borrell, 2006). Thus, separating issues of documentation status from those of ethnicity and race within Latinx communities is a complex task. Just as with other ERS practices, talking to children about documentation status (whether the parents are undocumented or not), preparing them for possible parental deportation, teaching them about the stigma associated with being Latinx—that is, perceived as not having “papers”—are essential tasks of Latinx parents. However, documentation status socialization is not restricted to Latinx families, as it is also likely taking place in other immigrant households. Thus, documentation status socialization should be included as a meaningful dimension of ethnic-racial socialization and further explored, as targeting undocumented individuals is a way to subordinate Latinxs. Furthermore, documentation status socialization can be understood as a more nuanced construct of ERS

that is specific to undocumented and mixed status communities. By explaining to their children, the risks and contingency plans associated with their vulnerable documentation status, parents are extending the preparation for bias messages in a way that is tailored to mixed status communities by preparing their children to face possible family separation and immigration trauma. Similarly, by engaging in conversations that highlight the strength and resilience necessary to immigrate to a new country in order to provide better opportunities for their children (as a way to atone for their inability to travel outside of the United States or afford certain privileges while in the United States), undocumented and mixed status parents are extending their cultural socialization practices. Rather than having their children resent their choices to immigrate to the United States, parents' immigration stories are instead seen as a source of pride, resiliency, and strength.

#### 4.1 | Implications for practice

Our findings have implications for schools and practitioners who serve predominant Latinx immigrant communities as they should be well informed of the unique stressors these community members face in order to provide them with pertinent resources. For example, if families develop an action plan in case of parental detainment and deportation, practitioners could provide support to the family by helping youth follow through with the action plan, in case of family separation. In addition, practitioners and community agencies could help train citizens and documented members of mixed status communities on how they can act as advocates for undocumented members of their communities, since documentation status socialization is prevalent in both documented and undocumented immigrant families. For example, by spreading awareness of the ongoing fear experienced by many mixed status families, encouraging people to stand up against xenophobia and teaching others how to protect their undocumented neighbors from ICE raids and arrests (Shoichet & Waldrop, 2019). Furthermore, using their documentation status privilege to support oppressed members of their ethnic group could lead to greater civic engagement among their youth (Pinetta et al., 2020).

Additionally, the association between ethnic-racial socialization practices and documentation status socialization has important implications for researchers. While it is likely that Latinx undocumented immigrants have been included in research efforts focusing on Latinxs more broadly, researchers and practitioners would gain a better understanding of the unique experiences of undocumented and mixed status individuals when the measures and methods used in research reflect a focus on capturing and better understanding the lived experiences of this group. When these individuals are aware of the safeguards in place to protect their privacy, such as with the use of certificates of confidentiality so that any information disclosed will not be used to harm members of their communities, they are more likely to share openly, adding personal and revealing information. Establishing this trust and allyship with this community has the potential to lead to more pertinent and refined research findings, allowing researchers and practitioners to respond more effectively to the needs and issues affecting these communities.

#### 4.2 | Limitations and future directions

There are several limitations to the study that should be kept in mind when considering our findings. The first limitation is that not enough studies with this hard-to-reach population have been conducted to fully understand the impact of undocumented status on children's and adults' educational and mental health. The few studies that have examined



these issues identify several risks associated with undocumented status for parents and children (Cross et al., 2020). Furthermore, it would be important to examine the possible protective effects of documentation status socialization, as this can potentially serve as a mechanism for healing from ethnic and racial trauma. Another limitation of the study is that all of the participants in our sample were self-identified Latinx mothers. Therefore, we are missing the voices of the fathers and youth of the families that participated. Given that research on socialization practices of Latinx individuals largely focuses on mothers, including fathers can yield an even more nuanced understanding of the ways that documentation status socialization can take place (Priest et al., 2014). Furthermore, also having youths' input on their perceived documentation status socialization would allow us to examine the congruence between the documentation socialization messages that parents report and how the youth understand them. Future research should incorporate reports from multiple family members to provide greater insight on how documentation status socialization affects Latinx immigrants' family dynamics. Future studies should also focus on examining how being undocumented or living in mixed status households might have lasting impacts on both children and adults.

Finally, qualitative work probing these practices should be used to build on current ethnic-racial socialization measures so that future quantitative studies could employ updated and more culturally relevant scales that would allow collection of more complete information (see e.g., Ayón, 2018). Past studies have associated ethnic-racial socialization (cultural socialization, preparation for bias, promotion of mistrust) with positive and negative outcomes for children depending on the type of messages (Hughes et al., 2006; Priest et al., 2014). This line of research should be extended to encompass the impact of documentation status socialization on children's academic and mental health outcomes, including how it affects children of different ages.

Another important limitation is that 90% of participants were of Mexican origin. Therefore, our findings may not be applicable to members of other Latinx ethnic groups. Similarly, the unique geographical location and ethnic enclave in which the study took place limits our ability to generalize our findings to other regions within the United States. Further research should strive to recruit a more diverse Latinx sample in order to better capture the nuances of documentation status socialization that takes place within other Latinx immigrant groups.

## 5 | CONCLUSION

The current study expands our understanding of conventional ERS practices of Latinx immigrant families to include documentation status socialization, particularly within the context of a hostile sociopolitical climate and legal violence directed against mixed status communities. Results showed themes pertaining to documentation status socialization that were salient in both undocumented and documented immigrant families, as well as themes that were only salient for undocumented families. These results provide new knowledge on the ways that Latinx immigrant parents modify their parenting practices to protect and instill a sense of security in youth who may live in fear of family separation. Furthermore, knowing more about how documented Latinx immigrant families engage in documentation status socialization is going to be increasingly important given that they can use their privilege to advocate for undocumented members of mixed status communities. At the same time, the fact that undocumented families engage in documentation status socialization provides further evidence of undocumented immigrant families' capacity for self-preservation and agency.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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**How to cite this article:** Cross, F. L., Martinez, S. B., & Rivas-Drake, D. (2021). Documentation status socialization among Latinx immigrant parents. *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, *2021*, 31–49. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cad.20420>