

**UCLA**

**CSW Update Newsletter**

**Title**

Researching and Learning from Undocumented Young Adults

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/44q809d7>

**Author**

Enriquez, Laura E.

**Publication Date**

2012-11-01

**Copyright Information**

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/>

Laura E. Enriquez is a doctoral candidate in sociology. Her dissertation project explores the ways in which legal status, gender, and education affect how undocumented young adults participate in U.S. society and feel a sense of belonging. She received CSW's Constance Coiner Award in 2012.



## LESSONS FROM THE FIELD

# Researching and Learning from Undocumented Young Adults

BY LAURA E. ENRIQUEZ



**I**T HAS BEEN FIVE YEARS since I attended my first undocumented-student organization meeting at a local university. While I went looking for information for my undocumented high school student mentees, I ended up talking to members about their educational experiences. These conversations became interviews and led to my first project on undocumented students' pathways to college. Becoming more involved in the undocumented immigrant youth movement, I have continued

my research on undocumented young adults.

As a feminist of color and an academic interested in community-based research, my mentors had taught me to think about the power dynamics inherent to my research. I was committed to ideals of reciprocity in which I would use my research to give back to the undocumented community I was researching rather than simply recording their stories and retreating to my office. As such, I have made an effort to make my research findings available to a broader audience, as well as to advise undocumented young adults whom I have met during fieldwork. I believe that these endeavors are integral both to resisting the social institutions that create marginalization and to empowering individuals to counter these forces.

Over the years, I have learned to think of research as a collective project where communities give us information for our research and we seek appropriate outlets for putting our research products back into the communities. While scholars talk about this form of reciprocity, we don't always think about the ways in which our research and our research participants can also change and affect us as individuals. While my research has led to a wealth of significant findings about the lives of undocumented young adults, it has also taught me a lot about my own life. Talking to countless undoc-



umented young adults about concepts of citizenship, membership, and rights has taught me a lot about the significance of citizenship in my own life. I share three of these lessons from the field with you now in hopes that their experiences will transform your conceptions of citizenship as much as they have transformed mine.

### **Recognize the Privileges Citizens Have**

As the member of the majority group, citizens often do not think about the significance of citizenship in their lives. Spending time with undocumented young adults and listening to their stories quickly brings some of these privileges to light.

**Physical Mobility:** Citizens have physical mobility. If they have a car, they can drive wherever they like without fear. Travelling to another state or country does not include worrying about

being apprehended by airport security or being barred from returning. Undocumented immigrants in California and most other states are not allowed to apply for driver's licenses and often depend upon public transportation and rides from friends to get to where they need to go. In Los Angeles, this dependence can mean spending long hours commuting on multiple buses. Those who drive without a license risk interactions with police at checkpoints or having the car impounded.

**Economic Mobility:** While economic mobility can also be elusive to many citizens, undocumented young adults must try to find stable jobs that do not require a social security number. As a result, many of the college graduates I interviewed work at fast-food restaurants and factories rather than their preferred professions. When they do receive job opportunities,

they often have to turn them down. Pablo Ortiz explains, “I was able to get a job opportunity to work with [a labor union], but I didn’t take it... There’s a big risk of traveling. I was actually one of the so-called randomly selected people [at the airport] for them to check my fingerprints. And that was actually very scary...I’d rather not risk it because if I do get caught up in that thing and get deported, I can’t provide for my daughter.” While citizenship might not guarantee you economic mobility, it at least lets you open the door for opportunity.

**Freedom from Fear:** Undocumented young adults live their lives in fear of being deported and torn away from the productive lives they have built for themselves. Citizens do not live in fear of being sent to a country they do not or of never seeing friends or family ever again. For instance, Janet Godinez explains her legal status to her children so that they are prepared in case she or her husband is taken into custody by immigration and/or deported: “With my kids, what I’ve been telling them is that in case something happens and I don’t go for them at school, to stay in school. Don’t come home, or don’t run away. Don’t get scared...I see that they get sad. And they get thinking about it, but then I tell them we hope that nothing happen to us.” Deportation is a growing concern



given new anti-immigrant policies and rising deportations.

**Freedom from Uncertainty:** While not everyone likes to make extensive plans for the future, citizens at least have the ability to think about the future. Many of the undocumented young adults I interviewed were unable to talk or dream about the future, and some even refused to make plans too far in advance. Adrian Perez explains: “I don’t want to be too positive or optimistic if something happens like deportation...I don’t really want to look into the future because that is what worries me the most. When you look at a future that you know nothing about, you become more and more desperate about the immediate results that you

cannot see.” While citizens may feel uncertain about their futures, at least they know that, for the most part, where they end up in the future largely depends on their own actions and decisions. The future of undocumented young adults lies in the hands of laws and policymakers.

### **Become an Active Ally**

Social justice movements show that recognizing privilege is not enough. Individuals have to actively use their privilege to counter institutional structures of inequality: If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor.

Knowing this and hearing the stories of my respondents, I committed myself to being an ally to the undocumented community. I mentored undocumented high school and college students, helping them find their voices so that they can empower themselves. I participated in community-based organizing with undocumented and citizen individuals working together to pass pro-immigrant legislation like the DREAM Act, which would provide them with a path to legalization.

My work has been fulfilling, but frustrating. I was, and often still am, unsure of how I should participate and when I should speak. As a second-generation Latina, I occupy mul-



multiple marginal social positions: I am simultaneously privileged as a citizen and marginalized as a woman of color. As a woman of color, I knew that I hated when people in positions of privilege spoke for me, and I was determined not to commit similar transgressions with my citizenship privilege. Knowing what I did not want to do, I focused on helping those who are undocumented raise their voices and empower themselves.

I began silencing myself when I participated in training for mainly undocumented immigrant youth. All of the other trainers were undocumented and introduced themselves with what was then the new rallying call of the undocumented student movement: “My name is...and I am undocumented and unafraid!” When I was asked to introduce myself, I stumbled. There was no formula for me to use, no means to explain why I was in this space or cared about these issues. Confused, I tried to explain my feelings to one of my undocumented friends and was disregarded. A few days later I was interviewing a citizen ally for one of my research projects; she haltingly confessed amid tears that she felt guilty for never doing enough. I realized that I too was feeling guilty for feeling upset after the training, for never doing enough.

I feel guilty for having a privilege that I

didn't choose to have. I try to remind myself that citizenship is a privilege and a power and that I need to use to create positive change. And the more I think about it, I begin to feel guilty for feeling guilty about being in a position of privilege. The cycle continues until I tell myself that my feelings and experiences aren't as important, that I am not the one being marginalized. And so I silence myself. I tell myself that I don't have a story. Do we need to silence some people in order to empower others? Feeling invalidated only serves to prevent participation. We know that coalitions fuel stronger and more effective social movements. The trick is building coalitions that can simultaneously empower and validate the stories of all involved individuals, regardless of their social position.

All these experiences have taught me that, as citizens, we need to cautiously embrace our voice in order to challenge dominant ideas about what makes someone a legitimate member of U.S. society. On some level, most of us experience some sort of marginalization. While we may not be able to feel or know each other's struggles, we can understand and sympathize by reflecting on our own experiences with both privileged and marginalized social positions. We can draw on these experiences to help make our society more just.

## **Citizenship Is an Action, Not Just a Piece of Paper**

While interviewing undocumented young adults and being an active ally in the undocumented immigrant youth movement, I began to question what citizenship really means. Who is a good citizen? Should having a U.S. birth certificate really make me a citizen? My perspective was called into question one day as I sorted through my mail. My heart sank as I picked up a letter, a jury summons, from the Los Angeles Superior Court. For most people, this is one of the worst pieces of mail they can receive. My mind raced through the list of things I needed to be doing and the various ways in which this summons was going to prevent me from doing them. When I mentioned it to a few friends, they started telling me how I could get out of it: “You’re an educated woman of color, they don’t want people who can think or are critical of ‘the system.’” We digressed into a discussion of the criminalization of communities of color and the prison industrial complex.

A few days later one of my undocumented friends saw my summons lying on my desk. His response: “You’re so lucky!” Seeing my confusion, he confessed that he wished he could serve on a jury. It was one of the many privileges that his undocumented status for-

bade him. I was surprised, but it made sense. Scholars and activists talk about the limitations that an undocumented status poses to undocumented immigrants: unequal access to higher education, no access to legal employment, fear of deportation, limited access to driver’s licenses, and so on. We don’t talk about the civic responsibilities and privileges, like voting and jury duty, which are also denied undocumented immigrants. I began to feel ashamed about all the complaining my citizen friends and I had been doing only a few days earlier. As we continued to talk, I realized that this was not something to complain or feel guilty about but rather was an opportunity to embrace my privilege and use it for positive change.

My friends and I had criticized the injustices committed by the judicial system but then refused to sacrifice our own time to take part in the system and make a difference on an individual level. Maybe that’s me being overly optimistic, that my one voice on a jury of twelve can make a difference in one trial. If we think about social movement organizing strategies—every additional voice or body at an event makes the group stronger and every vote counts—why should it be different when we think about jury duty?

To encourage participation, we say that every voice counts, but we also reframe the event:

**Scholars and activists talk about the limitations that an undocumented status poses to undocumented immigrants: unequal access to higher education, no access to legal employment, fear of deportation, limited access to driver’s licenses, and so on. We don’t talk about the civic responsibilities and privileges, like voting and jury duty, which are also denied undocumented immigrants.**

rallies to get out the vote become concerts and rallies for social justice issues feature music and celebrity speakers or offer food. A episode of *The Simpsons* explored how to make jury duty more interesting by framing it as “joining the justice squadron at the Municipal Fortress of Vengeance.” So maybe citizenship itself is in need of some reframing so that we can increase civic participation and get citizens to appreciate the privileges we are afforded.

One radical way of reframing citizenship could be to associate formal citizenship with citizen-like action or civic engagement. Not every country assigns citizenship in the same way. Most commonly, you can be a citizen by birth (as in the U.S.) or you can be a citizen by blood based on where your parents or grandparents were citizens (as in Germany). What if we assigned citizenship based on one’s actions? This idea is similar to elementary school awards for “citizenship,” which is really code for participating in class, being respectful of classmates, and helping others. People who live in a country would then have to demonstrate their citizen qualities in order to be granted certain privileges. If we did this, people would be less likely to take their citizenship responsibilities for granted because they would have to work hard to get them.

I know this action-based means of assigning citizenship is highly unlikely and practically impossible to implement. It, however, highlight the two sides of the citizenship coin: it is a legal status but it is also an action. You can be a legal citizen with or without practicing good citizenship. Alternatively, you can be undocumented while practicing good citizenship;. This argument is often made to gain support for the DREAM Act. In fact, given my undocumented friend’s reaction to my jury summons, it’s likely that he has the potential to be a better citizen than I. In fact, most of the undocumented young adults I meet are good citizens despite their legal status: they help their families, neighbors, coworkers, friends, and strangers; speak out against injustices; foster abandoned animals; spearhead community clean-ups; and encourage younger community members to stay in school.

These actions give me hope and make me strive to be a better citizen. I’ve decided to maintain my optimism: my voice on a jury, in an election, or at a rally can make a difference. If we each come to live our citizenship, we will be able to make our community a better place, one small action at a time.

Overall, my five years in the field with undocumented young adults has taught me a lot about myself and about what citizenship

means. I hope these few anecdotes encourage you to think about the significance of citizenship in your own life. In addition, I hope this inspires you to reflect on your own fieldwork and on the ways in which it has changed you.

—  
**Illustration credits:** illustration on page 16 by Jose Ortiz; photo on page 15 from Immigrant Youth Justice League; and drawing on page 17 by Julio Salgado.