



# Living a Deportation Threat: Anticipatory Stressors Confronted by Undocumented Mexican Immigrant Women

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## Abstract

Previous sociological research shows that exposure to stress varies by individuals' social statuses and is a central mechanism in producing mental health disparities. This line of research suggests that ethnoracial groups are more exposed to racial discrimination, thus negatively impacting their mental health. There has also been a growing literature showing how legal status impacts the mental health of immigrants and their families. However, the sociology of mental health and migration literature has largely remained disparate. This paper bridges these literatures to highlight how living a deportation threat manifests itself as an anticipatory stressor that negatively impacts undocumented Mexican migrant women's access to resources, social relationships, and social roles. Based on 30 semi-structured in-depth interviews with undocumented Mexican immigrant women from Houston, Texas, my findings reveal living a deportation threat is a perpetual anticipatory stressor that intensifies the effects of avoiding authorities, family fragmentation, and economic uncertainty. I argue this anticipatory stressor transforms into a chronic stressor that undocumented Mexican women confront daily. By situating this study within an anti-immigrant social context, it highlights the social processes and mechanisms that exacerbate the stressors undocumented Mexican immigrant women confront.

**Keywords** Deportation threat · Anticipatory stressors · Anti-immigrant sentiment · Undocumented Mexican immigrant women · Stress process

A growing body of research on the undocumented experience in the United States has shifted from questions of how immigrants are integrating into American society to instead problematizing the ways in which immigration laws and policies negatively impact their life experiences (Abrego 2014; Dreby 2015; Golash-Boza 2015; Gonzales 2015). This shift calls for researchers to move from integration approaches toward studying migrant "illegality." Moreover, this shift moves away from describing undocumented status as a binary toward framing it as a juridical and sociopolitical condition that is created by the state (De Genova 2002; Willen 2007). This paper sheds light on a mass deportation regime, facilitated by an increase of immigration enforcement, to understand the stressors undocumented Mexican immigrant women confront as they live a deportation threat. Specifically, this paper asks: how does living a deportation

threat impact the stressors faced by undocumented Mexican immigrant women in an anti-immigrant climate? How does living a deportation threat affect Mexican immigrant women's access to resources, social relationships, and economic resources?

## Deportation Statistics

The U.S. has experienced record high numbers of mass deportations (De Genova and Peutz 2010; Golash-Boza 2015). Some estimates suggest that over 2 million people were deported under the Obama administration (Gonzalez-Barrera and Krogstad 2014). A U.S. Department of Homeland Security (2014) report shows that in 2013, approximately 662,000 immigrants were apprehended, of which 64% were Mexican natives. Approximately 438,000 immigrants were deported from the U.S. of which 72% were Mexican natives. These deportation estimates exceed any other presidency in the history of the U.S. and have earned Obama the moniker of 'Deporter in Chief' (Gonzalez-Barrera and

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Krogstad 2014; Lind 2014). However, under the Trump administration, a deportation threat continues to intensify rapidly. This does not come as a surprise given that Trump ran his campaign on an openly racist platform spreading anti-immigrant views across the U.S. Since taking office in January 2017, Trump continues to spread messages of deportations, the construction and expansion of the wall, and the banning of Muslim refugees and immigrants. Indeed, since his time in office, many marginalized groups including, the Latinx undocumented immigrant community, Muslims, LGBTQ, refugees, documented immigrants, and their families are bearing the brunt associated with his anti-immigrant policies. Recent news reports have shown the empowerment and expanded legal authority that Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents now feel as Trump “has taken the shackles off” (Parton 2017). This “new freedom” to deport all undocumented or suspected undocumented immigrants (Kulish et al. 2017) has justified the mass deportations under the rule of law and has also emboldened nationalist groups throughout the U.S. Because of the foreseen increase of immigration enforcement under this new administration, it is imperative to expose the negative stressors associated with living a deportation threat and its impacts on the undocumented population, their families, and communities.

## Undocumented in a Deportation Era

Previous research on deportations has focused on the actual process of deportation (Coutin 2003; De Genova 2002; Golash-Boza 2012), post-deportation outcomes (Golash-Boza 2012; Peutz 2006), and the detrimental impacts of deportations on families (Chaudry 2011; Dreby 2012, 2015; Zayas 2015). The aftermath of mass deportations has resulted in families being torn apart with some parents being deported while their children remain in the U.S. being cared for by extended family, friends, or placed into the foster care system. Other families have been forced to move back to their countries of origin, including U.S.-born children, who are now growing up in their parents’ countries of origin (Dreby 2015; Zayas 2015). These U.S.-born children who are now growing up in other countries are what Zayas (2015) has described as the “forgotten citizens.” Undeniably, deportations are the greatest representation of exclusion for immigrants and their families (De Genova 2014; Golash-Boza 2012).

But it is essential to make the distinction between deportations and deportation threats. Deportations are the actual removal and expulsion of immigrants from a nation state (De Genova and Peutz 2010; De Genova 2002). Deportations also entail arrest and carry with them legal penalties such as being denied the right to future “legal” entry (De Genova and Peutz 2010). Although deportations are

considered single acts, deportability on the other hand is described as an ongoing experience (De Genova and Peutz 2010; De Genova 2002). A deportation threat, similar to De Genova’s (2002) concept of deportability, highlights the risk or threat of being deported. De Genova (2002) suggests that undocumented status is lived through consciously knowing that undocumented immigrants can be deported at any time. He argues that research should focus on the everyday risks of being deported. Talavera and colleagues also suggest this when they talk about “deportation as *a presence*: a constant possibility for people precariously living inside the United States” (Talavera et al. 2010, p. 167, emphasis in original). Following from these observations, I define the pervasive and pernicious deportation threat not by the act of being deported, but by the *threat* or *perceived threat* of being targeted for deportation. Moreover, I define a deportation threat as an ongoing risk that being deported may occur. This threat creates a constant fear for undocumented immigrants, their family, and loved ones.

## Deportation Threats, Stress Process, and Anticipatory Stressors

A growing body of research is documenting the daily and omnipresent deportation threat which creates fear, anxiety, and stress and thus has negative implications on the mental and physical health of undocumented immigrants (Cavazos-Rehg et al. 2007; Hacker et al. 2012; Arbona et al. 2010). Some undocumented immigrants have reported avoiding services including medical and social services, due to a fear of deportation (Chavez 2013; Hacker et al. 2012; Hardy et al. 2012; Arbona et al. 2010). For example, after the passage of SB1070 in Arizona, which allowed police officers to detain anyone who could not provide proof of citizenship, through a quasi-experimental longitudinal design, Toomey et al. (2014) found that young Mexican-origin adolescent mothers were less likely to use public assistance and their infant babies did not receive the necessary medical care. Others are finding that Latinxs who worry about deportations are more likely to experience negative health and emotional states (Cavazos-Rehg et al. 2007). And while the overall experience of migration can be a stressful experience for immigrants, regardless of their immigration status, a growing body of literature has shown the additional barriers the undocumented population face (Donato and Armenta 2011; Massey and Sánchez 2010), including the mental health impacts associated with living undocumented. The negative mental health impacts associated with being undocumented have been explored among Mexicans in the U.S. (Gonzales et al. 2013; Gonzales 2015) and among other Latinxs in the U.S. (Perez and Fortuna 2005; Joseph 2011).

The stress process model shows how social conditions affect people's mental health, therefore connecting individual-level illnesses with structural-level social conditions (Pearlin et al. 1981; Pearlin 1989). In doing so, it shows what can often be perceived as "individual illnesses" as representative of larger structural inequalities (Pearlin and Bierman 2013). This pushes researchers from re-framing mental health from an individual perspective to viewing mental health as a social phenomenon embedded in unequal social structures that generate, perpetuate, and exacerbate stressful experiences (Aneshensel 2015; Pearlin and Bierman 2013).

Stressors are conditions that threaten or impede an individual's capacities to maintain normal functioning (Aneshensel 2015; Pearlin and Bierman 2013). The stress process model was first conceptualized as having two major types of stressors, life event and chronic stressors (Pearlin et al. 1981; Wheaton 1990). While life events are described as single events, chronic stressors are defined as continuous stressors that occur regularly in the everyday lives, roles, and activities of people (Wheaton 1994). To date, the stress process has evolved to include other stressors including the stress universe. Wheaton (1994) developed the stress process universe to map out a myriad of stressors that people face including traumas, daily hassles, non-events, and chronic traumas, ambient, environmental stressors, and it continues to expand today (Aneshensel and Avison 2015).

Pearlin and Bierman (2013) push for more research to identify anticipatory stressors, or stressors that have not occurred but have the potential of occurring. The stress process model also highlights how exposure to stress varies by individuals' social locations (e.g., social statuses and social roles), access to resources, and effectiveness and/or abilities of coping with these resources (Pearlin 1989; Thoits 2010). Because of its focus on structural factors and its impacts on individuals, I use the stress process model to show how deportation threats are anticipatory stressors that may transform into chronic stressors, especially in a growing anti-immigrant climate. Moreover, this paper shows how a deportation threat may intensify and exacerbate undocumented Mexican immigrant women's access to resources, social relationships, and social roles, all of which may dampen the deleterious effects of living a deportation threat.

I argue that living a deportation threat is an anticipatory stressor, which can also be transformed into a chronic stressor. Additionally, I argue that a continuous anti-immigrant climate exacerbates undocumented Mexican immigrant women's ability to live freely because they constantly: avoid authorities, face family fragmentation, and endure economic uncertainty, all of which only intensify the stress felt by living undocumented in an anti-immigrant climate.

Thoits (2010), outlining the major findings of the stress process model, concludes that differential exposure to stress is a central mechanism in producing mental health

disparities across gender, social class, race and ethnicity. For example, women have higher rates of mood and anxiety disorders and men have greater alcohol and substance abuse addictions (Kessler et al. 2005). Research also supports direct links between low socioeconomic status (SES) and higher rates of mortality, disability, morbidity, psychological distress, and mental disorder (Brondolo et al. 2009; Kessler et al. 2005; Link and Phelan 1995; Marmot 2004; Williams et al. 2003; Williams and Mohammed 2009; Williams and Sternthal 2010). Other studies have observed a negative relationship between discrimination and the physical and mental health outcomes of people of color (Krieger 1999; Williams and Mohammed 2009; Williams and Sternthal 2010; Williams et al. 2003). Yet, less attention has been placed on how a deportation threat negatively affects the stress and mental health of undocumented Mexican immigrant women in the U.S.

The research questions guiding this paper are as follows: (1) How does living a deportation threat impact the stressors faced by undocumented Mexican immigrant women? (2) How does living a deportation threat intensify the ability to access resources, maintain social relationships and social roles, especially in an anti-immigrant climate? It problematizes these women's statuses by focusing on how an anti-immigrant climate shapes the stressors they confront. I situate this work in the stress process model literature, a leading framework in the sociology of mental health, and argue that the everyday threat of deportation is experienced as an anticipatory stressor which evolves into a chronic stressor taking a toll on these women's lives by impacting their access to resources, social relationships, and social roles, contributing to the following stressors: (1) avoiding authorities, (2) family fragmentation, and (3) economic uncertainty.

I focus on undocumented Mexican immigrant women for two primary reasons. First, historically undocumented Mexican immigrant men have been overrepresented in migration studies. In part, this is because past immigration laws favored men over women and policies facilitated the migration of men, while restricting the migration of women (Chavez 2013; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994). Some argue this was strategic as the programs were set up to facilitate the circular migration of men, and thus women and families were excluded from joining their partners in the U.S. (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Ngai 2004). The passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 led to an increase of women and families, as a result of one of its provisions of family reunification (Ngai 2004). But post-9/11, Golash-Boza and Hondagneu-Sotelo (2013) argue that Latinx men were targeted and deported, calling this a "gendered racial removal program." While most deportations have resulted in men deportees, women continue to be deported too and they also bear the brunt associated with the aftermath of deportations (Dreby 2012); hence, this is the second reason

that it is important to focus on women. This process can be interpreted through a gendered lens as women become “suddenly single mothers” after their husbands’ deportations (Dreby 2015). But regardless of actual deportations, *all* face a deportation threat. Given the scant research highlighting women’s experiences, I focus on women and how they live a deportation threat.

## Research Design and Methods

Data stem from a larger study designed to understand how illegality impacts the stress and mental health of 90 Mexican-origin women in Houston, Texas. The original study included semi-structured in-depth interviews with 30 undocumented, 30 documented, and 30 U.S.-born Mexican American women. Participant observation was also conducted by visiting participants in their homes, sharing meals, providing transportation, attending invited celebrations (e.g., birthdays, baptisms, *quinceñeras*, or by assisting their children with college and scholarship information). These observations enhanced the interview data by further contextualizing their everyday experiences. This article draws from interviews with 30 undocumented women. By doing so, it illuminates the complexities and rich narratives of undocumented women’s lives and highlights the stressors associated with living a deportation threat.

The sampling logic for interviewing 30 of each category was based on previous standard practices for sociological studies that use qualitative and interview data (Creswell 2015). Participants were all formally interviewed once and follow-up interviews were conducted with half of the participants. Data collection spanned across two waves: the first from 2009 to 2010 and the second from 2012 to 2013. 19 undocumented women were interviewed in the first wave and 11 additional interviews were conducted in the second wave. The rationale for conducting additional interviews with the undocumented sample resulted from the continuing rise of deportation rates, reaching the highest in 2013 (Gonzalez-Barrera and Krogstad 2014).

Houston was chosen as a research site because it is a major U.S. city with a large population of Latinxs and immigrants. Houston is the fourth largest urban city in the U.S. with a total population of 2,107,449 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008–2012 American Community Survey). Since the 1970s, Houston has had significant growth of ethnic and racial populations (Rodriguez 1993, 1999). The Hispanic or Latino population of any race makes up 917,133. Out of this population, the Mexican-origin makes up a total of 701,338. It is the largest subcategory among the Hispanic or Latinx category. Women of all races make up 1,051,474 of the population residing in Houston, Texas (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008–2012 American Community Survey). Houston

is also known as a gateway city for immigrants with a large undocumented population and with several jurisdictions that participated in the 287(g) and Secure Communities immigration enforcement programs. Both programs facilitated deportations by formalizing ties between law enforcement and immigration officials.

Snowball and purposive sampling were used to recruit participants. Snowball sampling is the best data collection technique when conducting research on hard-to-reach populations, such as undocumented immigrants (Sherraden and Barrera 1995). Purposive sampling is a non-random method used to recruit participants with specific characteristics. By using this technique, women who migrated clandestinely to the U.S. ( $N=15$ ) were recruited in addition to women who may have entered the U.S. with a tourist visa, overstayed it, thus shifted into undocumented status ( $N=15$ ). To gain access with participants, I first relied on my family and personal networks, in keeping with previous research that has used this technique (Jiménez 2010; Rendón 2014; Ramirez and Hondagneu-Sotelo 2009). As a native Houstonian and proud daughter of Mexican immigrants, with first-hand experiences with undocumented family members, I approached them as both an outsider and insider. Although I grew up in a mixed-status household, I also remain critical of my outsider position and acknowledge my privilege of having U.S. citizenship. My outsider/insider position, coupled with being referred to by other women, helped me establish trust and rapport (Sherraden and Barrera 1995). Most participants provided me with at least one person to contact and some provided up to six referrals. From all the women I met, only one declined to participate.

This study was approved by a university Institutional Review Board. Information sheets were used in lieu of signed consent forms to ease participants’ comfort that their identities would not be revealed and all participants were assigned a pseudonym. Participants ages ranged between 23 and 55 years old (mean age = 37). Most participants were mothers ( $N=26$ ) and families made up mixed-status households (i.e., including combinations of U.S.-born citizens, permanent legal residents, naturalized citizens, with undocumented family members). However, a few families were all undocumented in the household, including their children. After the passage of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), a few of their children were able to apply for DACA. Most participants were married ( $N=24$ ), some single ( $N=5$ ) and divorced ( $N=1$ ).

Interviews lasted between 1 and 4 hours and were conducted in locations preferred by participants, mainly in their homes except for two, which took place in restaurants. The interview guide asked open-ended questions capturing their migration experiences, perceptions of anti-immigrant sentiment, discrimination, racism, and conceptualizations of mental health. (Please refer to Table 1 for sample questions.)

For the purpose of this article, I draw from data to questions concerning their everyday experiences as undocumented Mexican immigrant women. Participants were given a \$20 cash incentive for their time. Providing incentives has been shown to improve response rates without compromising the quality of the data or the integrity of the research (Singer et al. 1999). Interviews were conducted in Spanish, digitally recorded with verbal consent, and subsequently transcribed. Interviews were analyzed in Spanish. Quotes were then translated to English and then back to Spanish, a technique known as back-translation, used to ensure accurate language translations and validity of the data (Chen and Boore 2009), by myself and a native Spanish-speaking research assistant.

After interviews were transcribed verbatim, I engaged in a systematic process of analysis to identify a set of common codes and themes (Creswell 2007; Miles et al. 2014). First, I engaged in open coding techniques to identify a range of experiences associated with living as an undocumented Mexican immigrant woman (see “Appendix”: conceptual model for more details). After establishing the major codes and themes, I engaged in focused coding and compared the experiences across women who migrated as young children and/or teenagers to those who were 18 and older when migrating. I also wrote analytic memos to help me decipher the codes and to assist me in contextualizing them with the

larger bodies of literature (Miles et al. 2014). Although the number of women that migrated as young children or teenagers was small, these women expressed stressors associated with the lack of educational opportunities in addition to the lack of labor market options.

To ensure validity, analytic rigor, and trustworthiness, I used member checking and reflexivity. Member checking was conducted as a technique to guard against selectivity in the use and analyses of these data (Merriam 2009) and to further build credibility of the findings (Morrow 2005). Reflexivity, the act of critical self-examination, invites the researcher to reflect and document their positionality and the ways it impacted the course of the research, starting from the research conceptualization and design to data collection and analysis (Hsiung 2008). Findings from the interviews revealed the stressors associated with living a deportation threat as well as how it intensified the effects on access to resources, social relationships, and social roles. The following are quotes from participants and pseudonyms are used to protect their identities. Quotes are used to establish credibility in qualitative research (Charmaz 2008; Morrow 2005).

**Table 1** Select sample questions of semi-structured interview guide

Topical areas	Semi-structured questions	Probes
Living without legal status	When someone mentions the topic immigration, what automatically comes to mind?	Why do you think these are the first things you think of when someone mentions immigration?
	Can you please describe your feelings on what it is like to live in the United States as a Mexican immigrant woman?	How does not having papers or being a woman (or both) impact your daily life?
	What are your opinions about undocumented migration to the U.S.?	Where do these opinions come from? Tell me a bit more
Discrimination and Perceptions of anti-immigrant climate	Do you feel “you belong” in this country? Explain why or why not	Can you tell me about an experience where you did not feel that you belong and how did this make you feel?
	Do you feel the United States (e.g., Americans) accept Mexicans? Explain why or why not	In answering this question, who or what groups of people do you define as American? What about Mexican immigrants?
	Have you felt discrimination in the United States, if so please describe your experiences and how they affected you?	Do you think this was based on race, gender, age, class, undocumented status, etc.?
	How do you feel about the deportations and raids taking place by ICE?	Have you, a personal friend, or family member ever experienced first-hand confrontations with ICE and if so please explain the situation?
Challenges and worries	What have you found to be the most challenging and how do you handle these challenges?	Did anyone help you? Who? What was that like?
	Do you feel you have had more opportunities in the U.S. compared to Mexico? Explain what types of opportunities	
	Do you have any worries now that you live in the United States, and if so what are your biggest worries?	Why do you worry about this and is there anyone you share your worries with?

## Results: Living a Deportation Threat

Living a deportation threat was described as an experience participants feared may happen to them, their undocumented family members, or their undocumented loved ones. Most participants either had family members, friends, or acquaintances that were deported. Others described the raids and deportations taking place in their communities and in the U.S. more widely. They were aware of these raids through various media channels, including radio stations, newspapers, local television channels, and social networking sites. And for those that personally did not know anyone that had been deported, they still identified with the deported because they understood that could be them. This is illustrative of how a deportation threat can be framed as an anticipatory stressor. Ana, 30 years old from Nuevo León, described the following in response to what life is like as undocumented:

you feel like you are wasting your time being here and without getting anywhere... You didn't anticipate that there will be so many barriers to get to where you want to be, so sometimes you confine yourself and I'm telling you it's all based on not having papers. You can't go out, you can't enjoy, you can't travel... because you're scared to be picked up and sent back to your country.

Ana's quote depicts the confinement and imprisonment felt as she navigates life without legal status. Through her quote, one senses the desperation and frustration she feels being in the U.S., a place in which many migrants yearn to achieve the American Dream. Indeed, many migrants buy into an American Dream ideology believing the U.S. to be the land of opportunity. However, soon their optimistic views become shattered when they are faced with the barriers of not having legal status to live worry-free. Living in an anti-immigrant climate with deportations at an all-time high makes Ana's undocumented status even more salient. Ana's quote depicts an urgency expressed by many of the women I met and speaks to the oppression and barriers they face as undocumented women. Wilkinson and Marmot (2003) argue that feeling oppressed has negative implications on health. They state:

It is not simply that poor material circumstances are harmful to health; the social meaning of being poor, unemployed, socially excluded, or otherwise stigmatized also matters (p. 9).

These women's experiences speak to Wilkinson and Marmot's statement on the negative health impacts experienced by socially excluded groups. Not only do these women face

oppression due to their legal status, but they are stigmatized and socially excluded. Deportations represent exclusion at its maximum, and send a message that undocumented immigrants are not wanted or welcome in the U.S. Under the current administration, immigrants, both documented and undocumented, bear the brunt associated with clear messages indicative of anti-immigrant views. Acknowledging the social exclusion and stigmatization that undocumented migrants face and how this impacts their stress and its implications on mental health is crucial.

Living a deportation threat also impacts their access to resources, social relationships, and social roles, which may then intensify the stressors they face. They actively avoided authorities and this resulted in a halt or lessened access to resources. Their social relationships were also hindered as they faced family fragmentation due to their inability to travel freely across borders to maintain physical contact with families and to care for their elderly parents. A threat of deportation also created stress from the possibility of the family being separated if an actual deportation were to take place. Finally, a deportation threat impacted their social roles as it placed barriers on their abilities to work, further intensifying their economic uncertainty. All these aspects are critical in facilitating social support and in understanding how access to resources, social relationships, and social roles may potentially combat or exacerbate the stressors they face.

## Avoiding Authorities

Participants expressed "living in the shadows" by avoiding authorities like police officers and ICE agents surrounding their communities, or any other individuals that look suspicious. They expressed a loss of control and autonomy, factors that are vital to experiencing security, stability, and positive health, including mental health (Wilkinson and Marmot 2003). For example, Zenaida, 23 years old from Guanajuato shared:

I feel sadness and fear at the same time. I'm always with that fear that something may happen like if the police stops me or that immigration will be there and I won't be able to make it home or if I'm not with my kids.

This fear was intensified by raids, roadblocks, and deportations taking place around Houston and across the U.S. Zenaida actually lived this experience while driving home. She was flagged down by ICE agents. Although she was signaled to move forward, she swore: "I will never drive

through that route again.” Zenaida and the rest of the participants were fearful of law enforcement. This demonstrates the detrimental impacts that immigrant enforcement policies and tactics have on the lives of the undocumented and their families. It also has implications toward feeling safe, building trust with law enforcement, and crime reporting (Menjívar and Bejarano 2004). Zenaida’s fear of police was also prevalent when she described a traumatic event of physical abuse from her husband. Although it happened numerous times, she did not call the police because both she and her husband were undocumented and she feared they would both be deported. She believed her neighbor called the police, leading to her husband’s arrest and subsequent deportation. Zenaida, although she faced multiple stressors, including the trauma associated with domestic violence, and on the one hand was relieved to no longer be in that abusive relationship, she also faced another stressor of having to care for her three young children as a single mother and with limited family support in the U.S. Eugenia, 39 years old from Coahuila, also described a sentiment of living in fear of being deported, in her words:

... [Life as an undocumented Mexican immigrant woman] is living in like they say in the shadows and darkness... It means you cannot live freely... you can’t go out freely to the stores, to run errands, because you are always fearful that they will deport you.

Eugenia’s description of living in the shadows along with Zenaida’s constant fear of police and immigration agents intensifies a hyper-vigilant mentality. Living in the shadows, at the margins, and constantly in fear has direct impacts on their social roles as mothers, wives, and daughters. For example, avoiding authorities has implications on the barriers these women face in accessing services and participating freely in their roles as mothers and caregivers. Participants described hiding their undocumented status especially because of a perpetual threat of deportation. A perpetual deportation threat can be described as an anticipatory stressor that may transform into a chronic stressor, especially because a deportation threat is continuous.

Living a deportation threat creates barriers for women preventing them from accessing services (including services for their children or calling the police when victims of a crime). This contributed to expressions of living in the shadows, feeling imprisoned, secluded, confined, entrapped, and limited (Berger Cardoso et al. 2018). The legendary *nortño* music group, *Los Tigres del Norte*, capture these sentiments well with their song called “La Jaula de Oro” or “The Gilded Cage” depicting the realities of the undocumented population who live a life “encapsulated within a larger social

system” (Chavez 1998, p. 160). This song personifies the limited mobility and containment they experience even as they participate in society (e.g., work, attend church, send children to school). Chavez (1998) describes this as “even though they are inside a larger social system, they are not fully part of that social system” (p. 160). This shows the far-reaching impacts associated with living a deportation threat and the implications this has on the lives of the children of the undocumented (Dreby 2015; Bean et al. 2015).

## Family Fragmentation

Deportations separate families, and although not all women in this study experienced an actual deportation, they all experienced a threat of deportation. Women described the possibility of their families being separated as a major stressor in two primary ways. First, directly related to the current era of mass deportations, participants described the possibility of being separated from their families if an actual deportation takes place. This included the possibility of they themselves, their undocumented children, or their undocumented husbands being deported, resulting in family separation. In describing the first way that family fragmentation becomes a stressor, Renata, 49 years old from Guanajuato, described her biggest worries living in the U.S. She explained:

My biggest worry right now is the possibility of one of my family members getting deported. I worry they’ll deport one of my sons, my daughter, son-in-law, or husband.

Although not all women had first-hand experience with deportations, all 30 women I interviewed described being exposed to a deportation threat. The threat of deportation was among their top worries and for those that had other undocumented family members, they worried for them too. For Renata, a mother of three undocumented young adults and an undocumented husband, she not only worried about the potential of herself being deported but that of her entire family. Her concerns were echoed by the other mothers and women that had undocumented family members. Kessler and McLeod (1984) describe the “cost of caring” or the consequences of women’s greater emotional investment in the lives of their loved ones. Their findings show that women are more burdened than men with the “cost of caring” resulting in higher levels of depression for women. Renata’s quote is illustrative of the burden of a deportation threat coupled with the “cost of caring” for family members that are also undocumented. Participants also described families being

torn apart due to deportations. They feared that if the threat of deportation became an actual deportation this may lead to the separation of their family.

Family fragmentation was also associated with women's inability to travel freely to and from Mexico, travel to other states within the U.S., and even to certain locations within the Houston area. When traveling in Houston they were wary of locations that were marked to be places with high ICE and police activity. Given the increased militarization of the border, a halt in circular migration has occurred (Massey and Pren 2012). Consequently, some people go many years and sometimes decades without visiting family members in Mexico. These experiences worry many undocumented women as some have elderly sick parents. Others may have family members residing in the U.S. that have moved to new immigrant destinations (Zúñiga and Hernández-León 2005) yet they will not visit these family members because of a fear of being stopped by police or immigration and being deported. This leads to a geographical isolation that turns into a social isolation as migrants are not allowed to physically be present with their families and loved ones. In describing the second way that family fragmentation becomes a stressor, I introduce Melissa, 38 years old from Nuevo León. She described:

For the simple fact of being far... of not being able to visit your family in Mexico. One goes through a lot of things here... Sometimes you just cry and cry. You get depressed without wanting to do anything... I have a lot of family in Mexico that I have not seen since I've been here... I believe that's what depresses you the most. Just thinking what if they get sick and if you have to leave. It's that constant thinking and you are always praying to God to take care of our families and to take care of us too, in order to calm us down a bit. That affects you a lot. The constant thinking... our parents are elderly... and thinking what if they get sick. What if you have to leave... and that depresses you.

Melissa and the other interviewed women described the stressors associated with not being able to visit their families. These responses represent the realities that undocumented immigrants confront without being able to visit their loved ones. Families go years, sometimes decades, including some that unfortunately are never able to reunite with their family members. Participants spoke of missing funerals because if they left to Mexico, they would not be able to return to the U.S. Unfortunately, many family members die without being reunited. Participants described caring for their elderly parents from afar, and the angst they felt because of their inability to travel freely across borders.

While monetary remittances were sent to Mexico, physical contact with their parents was non-existent. Previous research on remittances shows that women remit less than men. However, women who are unmarried are expected to remit more than their male unmarried counterparts because they are not expected to be the main breadwinner in their family (Flippen 2015). Family care behavior also varies by gender whereby women have more contact with parents than men, and daughters are often described as "kin keepers" and tasked with the responsibility of maintaining ties with extended family members (Flippen 2015).

Participants also described caring for their aging parents from afar. The plight associated with mothering from afar (Abrego 2014; Sternberg 2010) shows that mothers face greater challenges than fathers in sending money to their children (Abrego 2014) and children's reproaches were more directed toward mothers than fathers (Abrego and Menjívar 2011). Similarly, for those caring for aging parents from afar, participants described the limited amount of money they were able to send to their parents and for those with children in Mexico, this was even more pronounced. In addition to these caregiver stressors, participants described a geographical isolation.

The geographical isolation these women face extends beyond travel across borders. Participants also described the inability to travel calmly within U.S. borders. In other words, they described how visiting other family members that have moved to other U.S. states was also not possible for them as they saw this as "putting their life at risk of deportation." This further exacerbates a geographic isolation that these women endure as they do not feel safe enough to travel within U.S. states, including some areas within the city of Houston. Their geographical isolation transformed into a social isolation that negatively impacted the ways in which they can nourish and facilitate social relationships with their families and loved ones.

## Economic Uncertainty

Living a deportation threat also intensifies economic uncertainty, which manifests itself in various ways for undocumented Mexican immigrant women. First, participants described the lack of job opportunities and exploitative working conditions that they experienced directly or indirectly through their husbands. Second, participants described what it would mean economically for their families if an actual deportation took place. In describing the first way that economic uncertainty was manifested, participants shared that they or their husbands were often discriminated



and not paid for their labor, were over-worked, underpaid, or mistreated verbally while at work. They also described the negative impacts associated with programs like E-Verify, which they felt made obtaining a job much more difficult. For example, Renata, 49 years old from Guanajuato, described:

Being unemployed is hard. Since the president is getting stricter with the E-Verify program, many immigrants, we are feeling it.

Renata brings attention to an important movement under Obama's administration, in which he told Congress in June 2009 that the government will be "cracking down on employers who are using illegal workers in order to drive down wages – and oftentimes mistreat those workers." (cited in Bacon and Hing 2013, p. 150). Obama was referring to the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act, in which one of its provisions required employers to verify workers' immigration status and prohibited employers from hiring undocumented immigrants. In essence, this law made it a crime for undocumented immigrants to work in the U.S. (Bacon and Hing 2013). However, to this day employers are not punished; instead undocumented workers are punished and pushed into unemployment or even more dangerous and segmented labor markets. Renata described how undocumented immigrants are further disenfranchised especially because of programs like E-Verify that hinder the hiring of undocumented immigrants.

As we further discussed discriminatory experiences, Renata explained how other social locations intersect to increase the challenges in finding employment. She described the intersections of legal status, gender, age, and not speaking English as factors that worked against her:

Every time I go and apply for a job and if 3 working age teenage young women go and ask for the same job, they'll give it to them. They'll say, "We will call you" and they never call. Or if I call looking for a job and then they ask how old you are and I tell them my age, they'll simply say we'll call you back and again they don't.

The undocumented population are further disenfranchised by other factors like age, race, and gender. At the time I interviewed Renata, both she and her husband had been out of work. In addition to participants describing their limited job prospects, they also noted that once employed they were not able to move up within their jobs, regardless of their performance or ability. But for women that are employed, this mobility is even more pronounced as men have better opportunities for upward mobility (Abrego 2014). This shows how

economic uncertainty is also gendered. Immigrant women are more disadvantaged in the labor market compared to men, earning lower wages and pushed into low-paying job sectors (Abrego 2014; Hagan 1998). To describe the second way that undocumented immigrants experience economic uncertainty, Renata expressed:

If they [immigration agents] get me or my husband. And my family?... If the man is the head of the household who brings in the cash. What is a woman going to do with 3 small children and without anyone financially supporting the household? It's bad because sometimes the children are US citizens and if the mother can't work because she is taking care of the children, how will they survive?

For stay-at-home mothers whose husbands are the sole breadwinners, what will happen if they are deported? Dreby (2015) sheds light on how women become "suddenly single mothers" when their partners are deported. Golash-Boza and Hondagneu-Sotelo (2013) describe how deportations have disproportionately targeted Latino working class men, calling mass deportations a gendered racial removal program. Renata's quote is illustrative of a larger argument about how deportations economically impact the entire family especially if the man is the breadwinner. Participants also described the negative impacts that economic uncertainty has in their lives and how it unfolds for their families. For example, Ana, 30 years old from Nuevo León described a tragic incident that occurred during the economic crisis in 2008:

I'm devastated with the situation we are going through. We bought a house and we had to lose it. Those are things that get you depressed because those situations are not dependent on you... losing our house was very depressing. We were paying on it for 3 years. A new house and then because we didn't have any papers we couldn't refinance it... in those 3 years, not even once did we make a late payment... that's why I say that it's not on you, it's all based on being undocumented. My husband continued working hard, with a lot of drive but that was not sufficient... and now we are here (referring to her present home, a trailer). It was very difficult for me (her eyes get teary) because being here in the U.S. means being away from your country and it's a sacrifice.

This experience was depressing not only for Ana but for her entire family. Ana talked about how they reach a "glass-ceiling" that cannot be surpassed regardless of their "ganas" or hard-work ethic. They are faced with structural barriers

because of their undocumented status that excludes them from equally participating in the labor and housing markets. Renata and Ana's quotes demonstrate the economic uncertainty that undocumented immigrants are exposed to on a daily basis. Whether it is related to discrimination and exploitative work conditions, a lack of job opportunities, or the impact it has on their husband's jobs, these women attributed an anti-immigrant climate as exacerbating their stressors.

## Discussion and Conclusion

These findings help clarify how living a deportation threat extends to the previously underexplored domains of stress. In doing so, this study shows the heterogeneity of the undocumented population and pushes for an examination of the everyday impacts associated with living a deportation threat. Findings challenge scholars to consider how an anti-immigrant climate shapes the sources of stress for undocumented Mexican immigrant women. I argue a deportation threat can be experienced as an anticipatory stressor that may also transform into a chronic stressor because of the everyday fear and worry that it induces. Understanding how a failed immigration reform in addition to an increase in anti-immigrant enforcement helps to explain how an anticipatory stressor can also be a chronic stressor.

In keeping with recent observations that undocumented status is associated with increased levels of fear (Abrego 2011; Dreby 2015; Golash-Boza 2012; Menjívar 2011; Viruell-Fuentes et al. 2012), the findings in this study reveal the stressful lives endured by undocumented Mexican immigrant women. Findings also revealed that family fragmentation affects undocumented women in two ways. One is directly related to the current era of mass deportations, which may result in the separation of families if an actual deportation takes place. Many undocumented immigrants belong to mixed-status families (Menjívar and Abrego 2009). For example, nearly one in ten families with children in the U.S. is considered a mixed-status family (Fix and Zimmermann 2001). These families are directly affected by deportations since many families have been separated in large numbers (Golash-Boza 2012). The second way that family fragmentation unfolded was due to the inability to travel freely to and from Mexico. Even travel within U.S. borders was limited. This contributed to a geographical isolation that led to social isolation making it harder to foster social relationships. Not being able to visit their families and loved ones in their home countries disrupts their social support networks and contributes to them experiencing stress. Previous research shows that a lack of social support is a stressor for all immigrants, regardless of immigration status (Magaña and Hovey 2003). However, it is magnified for the

undocumented who cannot travel freely across borders to maintain family and community social ties.

Economic uncertainty is not a new phenomenon for undocumented Mexican immigrants. However, it is even more prevalent during economic downturns and when anti-immigrant sentiments are high (Massey and Sánchez 2010). Research on undocumented Mexican immigrants suggests that they face dire situations in the U.S. labor market and for women these experiences are worse (Abrego 2014). Many join the secondary labor market of the U.S. that is composed of labor-intensive and health hazardous jobs. They work long hours and are not given health benefits (Gleeson 2012). Many have also experienced exploitation by employers, harassment, or at times are not paid for their labor (Abrego 2014; Donato and Armenta 2011; Gleeson 2012; Massey and Sánchez 2010). This all exacerbates their already low economic status and prevents them from obtaining upward mobility.

Similarly but at a wider level, during economic downturns, society is impacted at large but when those that are directly exposed to economic hardships are one's relatives, friends, and co-workers, the misfortunes of others can create anxiety and stress on one (Zivin et al. 2011). This also speaks to the anticipatory stressors that one feels especially when those impacted by economic hardships are in our social circles. Likewise, undocumented migrant women also felt economic uncertainty, especially because of immigration policies that have become more stringent in the hiring of undocumented migrants coupled with anti-immigrant sentiment and deportations taking place at worksites and in public places (Bacon and Hing 2013). This all exacerbates the challenges women face in the labor market (Abrego 2014).

It is also essential to interpret and situate these findings within the migrant illegality literature which takes into account how larger immigration policies impact the everyday lives of undocumented women. Doing so allows for a nuanced understanding of how structural policies negatively impact the stressors these women confront. However, the stress process model has not explored the impacts of living a deportation threat on women's stressors. Therefore, this paper makes an important theoretical contribution by merging these literatures to highlight how living a deportation threat is a perpetual anticipatory stressor that intensifies the effects of avoiding authorities, family fragmentation, and economic uncertainty. I argue this anticipatory stressor transforms into a chronic stressor that undocumented Mexican women confront daily. These findings contribute to the stress process model by furthering the stress universe to include an underexplored domain of migration and by showing the stressors associated with living a deportation threat among undocumented Mexican immigrant women. By situating this study within an anti-immigrant social context, it highlights the social processes and mechanisms that exacerbate the stressors undocumented Mexican immigrant

women confront. The narratives I shared have implications on the mental health of undocumented Mexican immigrant women. I argue that the social consequences of living as undocumented immigrants in a deportation era, which specifically target Mexicans, have negative mental health implications for undocumented Mexican immigrant women.

Stress exposure for undocumented Mexican immigrant women is heightened under a deportation regime. This speaks to how undocumented status is socially situated and not an identity that exists in isolation. Being undocumented is a salient aspect of a person's life that affects their everyday interactions and relationships. It has an impact on one's social roles, social relationships, and access to resources. What it means to live undocumented also varies according to macro-structural inequalities such as racist and anti-immigrant policies that disenfranchise certain undocumented communities (Golash-Boza and Hondagneu-Sotelo 2013). Although undocumented immigrants are not a homogenous group and make up other ethnoracial groups, today's media and politicians foster sentiments that equate undocumented with Mexicans or Latinos more broadly. It is in this anti-immigrant climate that a deportation threat is fanned.

Given our current political climate, it is essential for social scientists to document the detrimental impacts that deportation threats create for the undocumented population residing in the U.S. and for their families and loved ones more broadly. Doing so helps to publicize and humanize the plight of undocumented immigrants. This is especially

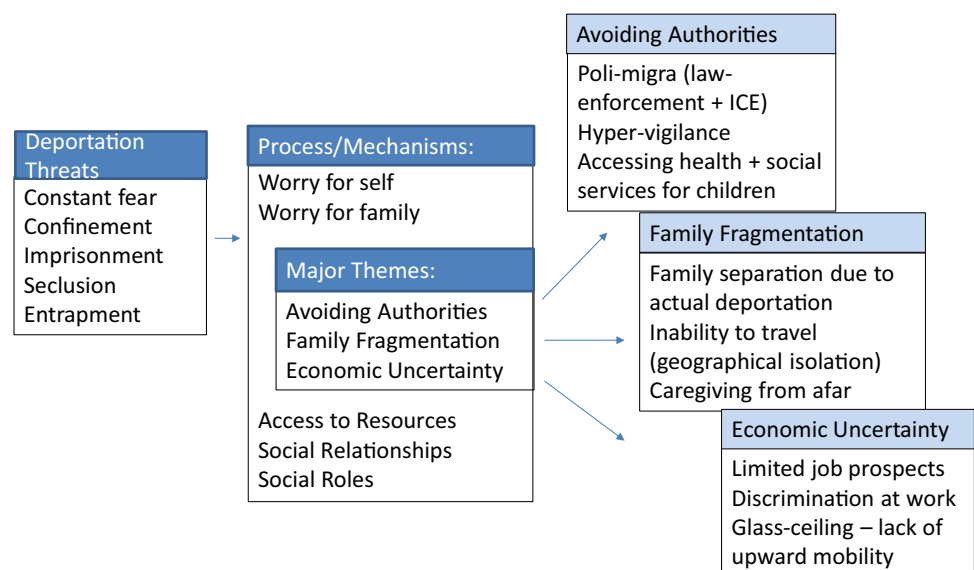
true under the current presidential administration, which unapologetically is now separating families at the border. Immigrant community members and advocates are worried deportations and immigration enforcement will continue to get worse under the Trump administration. Trump's rhetoric and zero tolerance immigration policies are terrorizing immigrant families and their loved ones. It is an especially pressing time to be shedding light on how a deportation threat intensifies the stressors felt by undocumented Mexican immigrant women and the larger community. It is my hope that by doing so social scientists can help toward proposing human right immigration policies that lessen the stress experienced by undocumented women, their families, and loved ones.

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## Appendix

See Fig. 1.

**Fig. 1** Conceptual model: deportation threats as anticipatory stressors



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