

“It Was Time to Take That Step”

Pursuing Legalization through Marriage

So much of your life is dictated by your legal status already. Why would you let a fractured system dictate who you're gonna share your life with or when you're gonna take that step? No! They already decide way too many things.

—REGINA CASTRO

Regina emphasized that she had always opposed the idea of legalizing her status through marriage. Immigration policies had already touched too many aspects of her life. It had dictated her educational trajectory and informed her career choices while also preventing simple everyday activities. She refused to let it also take precedence in the most intimate decision of marriage. But after marrying her citizen partner in her early 20s, Regina began to rethink her position:

[He saw] how sad I was. . . . I felt so unhappy with my career and not being in school and all that stuff. It's emotionally impacting for your partner because he is very limited in what he can do for me, so I think that part is tough. . . . I had to take a step back and realize how he was feeling and how he was doing.

Regina's undocumented status took a toll on her husband as he helped her negotiate her undocumented status, witnessed her frustrations, and provided emotional support. Setting her pride aside, she agreed to consult a lawyer.

The lawyer repeated what she already knew: her legalization hinged on proving that she entered on a valid visa. Many establish this through entry stamps in their passport or electronic copies of their admission record. Regina's case was complicated; she needed to find the actual slip of paper they had given her. If she didn't, she would be able to legalize her status only if she underwent consular processing in Mexico and risked facing a 10-year bar on her return. Luckily, Regina's mom unearthed the paper a few months later.

Regina and her husband filed their application and began to prepare for their interview. Fearing that the immigration agents would suspect marriage fraud,

they amassed evidence of its legitimacy. Whether opening up a financial account, identifying an emergency contact, or making decisions about their future education and careers, both considered how their actions would support or endanger their initial legalization petition and subsequent applications to renew her permanent residency and later seek U.S. citizenship.

Legalizing one's status presumably removes the consequences of illegality and fosters integration. Indeed, Regina's transition from undocumented immigrant to permanent resident improved her life: she moved into more stable employment at a nonprofit, eventually reenrolled in college, and accessed prestigious internships to further her career. Immigration law, however, ties this opportunity for upward mobility to a romantic relationship. This complicates marriage as the next step in family formation—discouraging it in some cases, encouraging it in others, and infusing all relationships with emotional baggage.

Scholarship has traced the intricacies of immigration policy and the limited pathway to legalization through marriage. Focusing on those who entered without inspection, Ruth Gomberg-Muñoz exposes the complexities of consular processing, including the risks and realities of experiencing a 10-year bar to reentry.¹ Such state intervention separates families or expels all members from the country, punishing both undocumented immigrants and U.S. citizens. This work, however, presumes that undocumented immigrants like Regina, who face straightforward pathways to legalization, are left unscathed. This chapter challenges this assumption, detailing the enduring consequences that emerge even when the process is relatively straightforward and successful.

Focusing on 22 formerly undocumented young adults who legalized their immigration status through marriage, I trace how immigration law required couples to establish, construct, and perform their relationship in specific ways to achieve their legalization goals. All undocumented and citizen partners felt disciplined by this process, but it was most intense for those who underwent consular processing in Mexico. Years after they achieved legalization, the process still haunted couples, as it had seeped into the foundation of their marriage. Despite the positive material benefits of legalizing one's immigration status, the process produced new and enduring social and emotional consequences for both undocumented and citizen partners.

“IT WAS A FEELING OF DESPERATION”: ADJUSTING MARRIAGE AND WEDDING EXPECTATIONS

The marriage myths that I traced in chapter 2 loom large for undocumented young adults and their romantic partners as they discuss pursuing marriage and legalization. Messages that she was a “magical citizen wife” encouraged Nicole Davis to raise the possibility. She remembered prodding her undocumented

partner into considering marriage after six months: “He was kind of hesitant at first when we discussed it because . . . he didn’t want it to be about that stuff. But my feelings [were] kind of like, If we’re gonna do this eventually, we should do it now.”

All undocumented young adults were wary of embarking on this stigmatized and legally complicated pathway. But those who felt extremely excluded began seriously considering legalization through marriage. Deciding to do so affected the very foundation of their relationship as they aligned immigration law with romantic notions.

“Let’s Do It”: Marriage Decisions

Economic barriers, including not having enough money, a good job, and savings, dissuades many from marriage.² As shown in chapter 3, these same concerns often contribute to undocumented men’s disrupted family formation. Yet the intersection of these economic barriers with the particularities of family-based immigration law establishes a unique situation in which economic immobility can have the opposite effect on marriage—driving it rather than preventing it. Marriage carried a promise of legalization and the amelioration of barriers to upward mobility; this decision, however, carried long-term consequences by dictating the progression of romantic partnerships and marriage timing.

Love and Legalization: Moving toward Shared Stability. Shared consequences pushed long-term couples to raise the possibility of marriage as they hoped to find relief from punitive immigration policies and to secure their family’s stability. Manuel Serrano’s wife, Carmen, remembered that his undocumented status was not an issue when they were dating: “It was never a problem. It was not a high topic [of conversation]. Then we moved in together [and] I got pregnant. And that’s when I was like, ‘Oh crap, you might be losing your job again?’” Carmen realized the severity of Manuel’s economic barriers when he was offered a supervisor position at the store where he worked. Her reaction was “Do it! It’ll be good if you get more money.” He reiterated that he would likely be fired because the promotion would prompt them to attempt to verify his Social Security number. Carmen realized, “Shoot, it’s going to affect me directly. Before I would know about legal and nonlegal status, but it was never something that affected me until I depended on that.” Now that Carmen finally saw how Manuel’s economic limitations translated into family-level economic immobility, her immediate thought was “Should we get married legally and help you out?” Driven by marriage myth messages, she and Manuel married a few days later.

I spoke to several couples whose story reflected Manuel and Carmen’s decision-making process. Some married quickly, while others planned a wedding. Many filed legalization paperwork around the same time as their marriage, but

some had to wait to save up the \$3,000–\$5,000 they would need for application and legal fees. In some cases, including Manuel's, marriages were not always followed by immediate legalization; couples learned afterward that the legalization process would be more complicated than they had anticipated. Despite the specifics and outcomes of their cases, immigration law dictated their relationship progression.

Fast-Forwarding and Being Strategic: Addressing New Threats to Individual Opportunities. A segment of undocumented young adults saw marriage as a foothold to pursuing upward mobility through legalization. After living the majority of their lives jumping over hurdles raised by their immigration status, they encounter ones that they cannot overcome alone. Dolores Inda had fought to pursue her college degree—paying her full tuition out of pocket and navigating an institution that was not prepared to meet her needs. “I had recently graduated from [college] and I wanted to do something. I wanted to get a job. I wanted to apply my degree.” Intent on becoming a nurse practitioner, Dolores recognized that her immigration status posed an insurmountable barrier. It would be impossible to get loans to pay for the program, and she could not apply for her license or be employed in the field because she lacked a Social Security number.³ Although her family's pending legalization petition had recently been approved, she had turned 21 and was no longer included. Being the only remaining undocumented family member “just hit me, hard. . . . I knew something had to be done. Desperation, it was a feeling of desperation.” In these extreme moments, marriage offered a glimmer of hope, making undocumented young adults feel that they *needed* to get married, even if they were not necessarily *ready* for marriage.

Some had been dating their partner for a short time and decided to fast-forward their relationship to marriage. When her anxiety peaked, Dolores had just started dating her boyfriend. Conversations about her desperation to legalize arose periodically over the year until “one day he said, ‘Let’s do it. I’ll help you.’” They soon moved in together and married in a civil ceremony. Wanting to minimize the impact on their relationship, they told only immediate family members and agreed that they were still boyfriend and girlfriend. This complicated the relationship. When I asked if theirs was a real marriage, Dolores responded slowly, concluding, “It’s a gray area.” They were in love and committed to pursuing a relationship, but they were not ready for marriage, and “it was strictly going for me to get my papers.” She explained,

My partner and I both highly value marriage and the traditions that came with it, and we wanted to both be able to experience that. So we tried—and it’s hard to completely accomplish this—but we both tried very hard to not see it as marrying. Because we wanted to be able to one day get married and be able to embrace all the things that come with having a marriage and having a ceremony.

She admitted that they struggled to negotiate the transition and “definitely had a bumpy ride . . . because we did expedite it.” Their relationship blossomed into a stable partnership, but three years of being technically married had blurred the lines they had drawn. They were now in a place where they might have otherwise married but never seemed to get around to it.

Single individuals similarly found themselves pushed into marriage. Betty Calderon had successfully navigated immigration status barriers until she was a year away from graduating from college: “I had a decision to make whether I was just gonna wait around and hope for a miracle . . . or actually do something about it. And get to where I wanted to be and where I needed to be before I finished my education.” Facing the prospect of not being able to use her degree, she felt “impatient” and became susceptible to marriage myths. Not in a romantic relationship, she approached her best friend: “He wasn’t married. . . . I felt comfortable with him. I started telling him that I wasn’t legalized . . . and then I asked him, ‘This is gonna sound really weird, but will you marry me?’” He agreed, and they held a civil ceremony two months later, and she filed for legalization soon after.

Changing Laws: Capitalizing on New Opportunities. Many undocumented young adults in committed relationships were eager to file a petition, but legal barriers prevented it. When we talked in 2011, Carlos Almanza had just graduated from the University of California. He was working as a legal assistant and thought law school might be next. He felt “unaccomplished. Like, I feel like I should have a good job. I don’t know. I feel like I’m not doing anything with my degree. I’m learning a lot where I work at, but—I hate to sit behind a desk, and answer the phones, and talk to people. I don’t know. I don’t know. I want to do something more.” Longing for legalization, he spent his days preparing immigration paperwork for clients; he fantasized about adding his name to one of their petitions or arranging to be a victim of a crime so he could get a U visa.

When we discussed the idea of legalizing his status through marriage in 2011, Carlos joked, “I’m gay. Otherwise I could’ve gotten married [for papers] a long time ago.” Same-sex couples could not then petition for their spouse’s immigration or legalization petitions. It was not until 2013, when the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) was declared unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court, that same-sex partners could petition for immigration benefits for their spouses. Carlos explained that this ruling influenced his and his citizen partner’s discussions of marriage: “He’s always said, ever since [the] DOMA [decision] went through, we had that option [of applying].” They both entertained the idea but knew that Carlos had not entered with inspection; they would not risk his 10-year banishment to Mexico.

Receiving DACA changed the equation. While not a pathway to legalization, DACA enabled recipients to apply for advanced parole to travel outside the United

States for educational, work, or humanitarian purposes. This facilitated a legalization application by providing a recent legal entry and removing the threat of a 10-year bar.⁴ At the time of our second interview, Carlos's advance parole application had just been approved, and he was preparing to travel two weeks later. He and his partner were discussing marrying after he returned. Within a year of his trip, they had married, and he had become a permanent resident. Their case exemplifies how recently changed policies may catalyze marriage decisions within long-term committed relationships of both same-sex and heterosexual couples.

*"Legally Married" and "Married Married":
Strategic Wedding Planning*

Linking legalization and marriage requires mixed-status couples to align law with romance. Most aspired to have some version of a fairy-tale wedding: a ceremony and reception complete with white wedding dress, gorgeous hall, and long guest list. These ideals often stem from media representations that create social pressure to perform extravagant wedding rituals. Such images permeate popular culture, spanning from children's toys to TV show and film plots, and fueled by a burgeoning wedding industry.⁵ These hegemonic ideals permeated couples' wedding expectations, but their legal reality created time and financial constraints that made it relatively impossible to quickly move toward legalization while fulfilling these desires. Many couples thus planned for two weddings: a civil marriage ceremony for the legalization process and a traditional wedding ceremony and reception to fulfill their romantic ideals.

Those who employed this strategy did not see their civil wedding as a *real* wedding. Brandon Erickson, who fast-forwarded his relationship to marriage, and Rosa Lopez, who had been with her partner for eight years before marriage, shared:

Brandon: We didn't end up getting married in a way . . . either of us necessarily wanted. . . . I think if we would have waited longer and had, like, a real wedding—ceremony and reception and everything. It's because of this [immigration] process that it became just [like] we need to get to the courthouse.

Rosa: We didn't have a wedding when we got married. We just went to the court—me, him, my mom, my dad, and his parents. . . . At that time we weren't ready to have a wedding. We didn't want to spend the money. And our family, you know, when you start saying, "Oh, I'm going to get married," everyone just expects [all this stuff].

Regardless of how their marriage aligned with their relationship's progression, most couples wanted to pursue legalization quickly. Often, this meant that

there was no time or money for a conventional wedding. Planning two weddings helped them strategically negotiate their desperation for legal status and romantic notions while also reducing the perceived impact of immigration law on their relationship.

This strategy had consequences. Brandon's wife, Cindy, confided that "it took away the romance from it because it wasn't a usual marriage." She thought her wedding would be a "monumental thing in your life," complete with "bridal showers and dresses and rings." Even though both their families were present for the civil ceremony, Cindy struggled to accept that they did not have "a big white wedding." Two years later, they still hoped to find the time for "an actual ceremony."

Hoping to guard against these consequences, Rosa and her partner, Agustin, hid their civil marriage from their friends and extended families. They filed his legalization paperwork and had the "real" wedding a year later, after Agustin had legalized his status and "when there was money." Similarly, Santos Castellanos and his citizen partner hid their civil ceremony and de-emphasized its importance, referring to it as when they "signed the papers."

Having two weddings can be an effective management strategy, but it establishes a marriage on shaky ground. Some couples struggled to talk about their weddings. Santos stumbled over his words as he tried to make a point about how long he had been married: "Well, actually legally married for four years—but *married* married—or I guess religiously married." Exasperated, he shook his head dismissively and said, "You know what I mean." When I spoke with Agustin and Rosa, they struggled when I asked when they married. Agustin picked up a silver picture frame from a nearby table—showing me the wedding picture it held and reading the engraved date on it. He smirked, saying, "It's always here so I won't forget." But Rosa shook her head and said, "No, but, see, that's the wedding. We didn't have a wedding when we got married. We just went to the court." Struggles to pinpoint marriage dates may seem innocuous, but anniversary celebrations, getting-to-know-you conversations, and other moments indefinitely remind couples of their complex relationship trajectories and past legalization struggles.

This wedding strategy can also affect relationship dynamics. Ricky Montoya had married his citizen wife in a civil ceremony three years earlier and was caught up in a complex legalization process that had stranded him in Mexico for almost two years while she remained in the United States. He recalled, "At first, she was happy that she was going to get married. But in the long run, she hates me, because I gave her this fake wedding, in her eyes." Unable to live up to the promise of providing a "real" wedding made Ricky feel that he had failed. He added, "Most of her friends are getting married, and they're having nice weddings and all that. So now she feels like she got robbed." Although his wife did not mention these feelings, Ricky's perceptions shaded how he felt about their relationship and his role in it. Unlike Ricky, Santos was able to provide his wife with

her dream wedding because he was able to quickly adjust his status and secure a high-paying job afterward. They had a large ceremony and reception at a golf course, complete with a cocktail hour, three-course meal, salsa band, and photo booth. His wife, Sofi, admitted that she would have been resentful if he had not: “Maybe I wouldn’t have expressed them explicitly or maybe I would’ve. I don’t know. But 100 percent [resentful].”

Conflict also emerged as couples tried to manage their family members’ opinions. Javier Espinoza, a recently legalized participant, explained that he and his wife continue to hide their civil ceremony from his wife’s parents even though it had been over five years: “It felt like I betrayed them ’cause they’re such an amazing in-laws. . . . I don’t know when I’m going to tell him [her dad]. I don’t know if I should. I think my wife said not to ever tell them.” This choice maintains a distance between him and his in-laws and has also created tensions with his wife. Even when parents knew about the two-wedding strategy, tensions sometimes emerged because it did not match their cultural or religious desires for a traditional wedding ceremony.

In all, immigration law complicated mixed-status couples’ marriage decisions, and then they worked hard to find a way to align their wedding ideals with their legal realities. The emotional labor they poured into these decisions continued to follow them as they married and began the legalization process.

“YOU HAVE TO LEGITIMIZE YOUR RELATIONSHIP”: PERFORMING LOVE IN THE LEGALIZATION PROCESS

After marrying, couples embarked on the complex process wherein the citizen spouse sponsors the undocumented partner’s adjustment of status application. Both partners painstakingly fill out multiple forms with over 40 pages of detailed information, including immigration and citizenship history, residence and employment histories, income, assets, and three years of tax information. They gather copies of required eligibility evidence, including birth and marriage certificates, tax documents, and passports. If the petitioning spouse’s income is not high enough, they must find someone who will serve as a fiscal sponsor and have them fill out forms.⁶ The undocumented partner undergoes an official medical examination, and they both take passport-style photos. All this paperwork is submitted along with required fees, which in 2019 totaled at least \$1,760.⁷

Couples then anxiously await an appointment notification to interview. If they entered with inspection or are otherwise eligible, they report with their spouse to interview at a local U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) office. If they entered without inspection or are otherwise ineligible to adjust their status within the United States, they are summoned to appear alone at the consulate office in their country of origin.

As they prepare, couples recognize that they will have to counteract marriage myths. They and their relationship documents must perform their love for the benefit of the immigration officer, who is charged with “determin[ing] whether the marriage is bona fide” and “was not entered into solely for immigration purposes.”⁸ Those who deviate from expected relationship patterns risk further interrogation, delay, or denial because of suspicion of marriage fraud. I explore here the interview experiences of couples who adjusted their status in the United States because both spouses attend the interview and must participate in relationship performance.⁹ Regardless of where the interview takes place and if both spouses are present, the process breeds long-term consequences by requiring couples to portray a conventional and recognizable relationship to immigration officials.

Preparing Materials to Prove One’s Relationship Is “Real”

Anticipating the need to prove their love, couples set out to gather as much proof of their relationship as possible. The interview appointment notice from USCIS contains a checklist of required documents, including a directive to bring “supporting evidence of your relationship, such as copies of any documentation regarding joint assets or liabilities you and your spouse may have together. This may include: tax returns, bank statements, insurance documents (car, life, health), property documents (car, house, etc.), rental agreements, utility bills, credit cards, contracts, leases, photos, correspondence and/or any other documents you feel may substantiate your relationship.”¹⁰ This notice, however, is usually received only a month or two before the interview. All participants reported preparing much sooner, often as soon as they decided to pursue legalization, by seeking advice from people who had gone through the process, internet forums, and/or lawyers. This head start was necessary to negotiate the frustrating bureaucracy involved in getting multiple names on an account and collect a longer history of documents. Remembering the experience, Cindy Figueroa sighed heavily. “Oh, God! I’d rather individually pluck my eyelashes out!”

During the 10 months between their wedding and filing her application, Mia Ochoa began building up strong institutional evidence of their relationship; she believed this entailed performing a conventional marriage with joint finances. Feeling that they needed “papers under our names, like the bills,” they moved out of her parents’ house and put all their bills in both their names. They made calculated decisions about “opening credit so they can see that we both are joined in our accounts. That is when I closed my bank account, because we had separate bank accounts, so we decided, ‘OK, let’s put them together.’ And that way they are going to see, ‘OK, they are married.’” Mia did this out of a need to perform their relationship but would have preferred to keep their finances separate. Indeed, over a quarter of millennial couples, aged 23–37, keep their finances separate.¹¹ She recalled, “I was scared because my sister had a bad experience with her husband,

so I didn't want to go through that. There was times when she would tell me, 'I earn more than him, so he is using my money.'" Finances are fraught with potential for conflict, and many worried about the cascading consequences of financial intermingling for their relationships' power dynamics. Despite this, immigration law pushed them forward.

Couples also amassed evidence of their romantic history to perform a conventional relationship trajectory. Mia prepared an album with six years' worth of photos to prove the length of their relationship, since "you can see in our faces we are different [ages]." She unearthed a notebook of letters they exchanged in high school. Others pulled out similar evidence—scrapbooks, notes, cards, wedding pictures—documenting their relationship's progression. These forms of evidence often relied on having a relationship that followed a traditional timeline. Further, it was available only to couples who had publicly performed their relationship in expected ways; others were at a disadvantage.

Several couples struggled to perform a conventional marriage. Javier Espinoza spoke about how he and his wife struggled to document their shared finances: "I was so broke, so I was living with my parents. So my parents wrote a letter [that we live there together]." Living at home meant that joint rental agreements and utility bills did not exist. Limited incomes also made it unlikely that couples had accumulated other joint bills, assets, or insurance. Such difficulties were most common among couples in which both partners reported low incomes because of underemployment, low education levels, or being enrolled in school.

Couples who had shorter relationships had to be creative. Regina Castro remembered, "We got married before we even reached one year of being together in our relationship. So in terms of filling out this gap of all these years of knowing each other, we didn't have that. . . . We just had our joint bank accounts, we had some credit cards together. . . . We didn't have a lot of pictures." Their lawyer worried about their lack of proof and instructed them to get letters from friends corroborating their relationship and their good moral character. They strategically deployed their connections from being politically engaged during college. She explained, "I got a statement from a state congresswoman [I had worked with], and he got one from the [state] senator he worked for. When we went to the interview, once they saw those two letters, they just asked us what our name was and how we met, and we walked out the door with our stuff." Few individuals, though, have such powerful connections to counterbalance their limited proof. Such couples must rely on their ability to successfully perform the relationship during their interview.

Portraying a "Real" Marriage in the Immigration Interview

During the interview, immigration officials ask questions about the relationship to determine if it is real. I asked similar questions during my interviews: How did you meet? When did you marry? Often there was variation in how couples

recounted their stories. Mia's husband could not remember the year they married, laughing: "This is the problem with men. They forget." Retellings often differed as partners forgot dates and details; assuming that this would look suspicious, couples practiced portraying a clear relationship history that matched hegemonic preconceptions.

Fearing scrutiny, many couples reviewed interview questions meant to assess if they had common knowledge of each other, their relationship, their home, and their daily routines. Mia remembered thinking, "Oh my God! I have to get to know him," even though they had been together for six years. "We even sat down and we started asking each other like, 'What is your favorite drink?' We knew, but we just wanted to make sure that it would be the same." In the weeks before their interview, Regina and her husband walked through their apartment and made mental notes about mundane details: the microwave was on top of the refrigerator, her husband had used a Sharpie to change the brand name from MagicChef to MagicChief—an inside joke. They clung to these trivia as evidence of their love.

Both undocumented and citizen partners developed anxiety about effectively portraying a legitimate marriage. Manuel Serrano, a recently legalized participant, and Rosa Lopez, the citizen partner of another participant, shared,

Manuel: I was sweating. . . . I was so scared that I couldn't even—I was thinking, "I'm not going to be able to answer the questions because I'm so nervous. And then he's going to notice that I'm so nervous and he's going to think there's something wrong."

Rosa: You hear stories and people tell you these things. And you start thinking, "Oh my God, what if they don't believe [us]?" . . . I knew deep inside like they can't prove that I'm lying because I know this marriage is true. . . . But at the same time you wonder, "What if they really don't believe me?"

Both Manuel and Rosa had strong cases. Manuel and his wife had been married for three years and had a daughter before they even applied. Rosa and her husband had been together eight years before they married and filed his application. Yet the depth of their relationship did little to allay their fears, and they overprepared for the interview.

In many cases, couples remembered their interviews proceeding quickly and smoothly because their evidence performed their relationship for them. Manuel's wife, Carmen, remembered that they were asked only a few questions: "Who introduced you guys? How did you guys meet? When did you guys move in together?" Manuel added that they asked him how often his wife was paid, which was compared to the joint bank statements they provided. This portion of the interview was over in minutes. Hypothesizing why, Manuel compared himself to friends who had received much more scrutiny and had to answer more personal

questions: “It’s because they don’t have kids or because they got married on a weekend, then the next week they submitted the [legalization] paperwork.” Couples who had constructed clearly interconnected lives—financially through joint accounts or socially through children—often reported a quick and easy interview.

Couples were scrutinized when they did not have sufficient institutional evidence. Ramón Le, Cindy Figueroa, and Javier Espinoza—all individuals who fast-forwarded their relationships to pursue legalization—provide examples of the type of questions that emerged:

Ramón: They asked, “How come you don’t have more [wedding] pictures?”

Cindy: He came in asking us about our relationship from beginning to end. Asking about our bathroom—what does it look like. I go in the bathroom every single day, but I can’t really describe it. . . . He’s asking like, “When you turn the [cold water] faucet on, is it left or right?” And I’m going, “Oh my God! I don’t know.”

Javier: He asked me questions—which side of the bed she sleeps on, what kind of underwear she wears. . . . It was really awkward for me. . . . And then he was just asking me sexual questions. I just refused to answer those questions.

Laura: Like what?

Javier: Like what’s her favorite [sexual] position and that kind of stuff. The guy was getting real kinky with me.

Their relationships had not followed a traditional trajectory. Ramón and his wife, both ethnically Chinese, had employed a two-wedding strategy and so did not have traditional photos the immigration agent associated with typical Chinese wedding ceremonies. Cindy and her husband had a nontraditional relationship progression, having dated on and off for years. Javier and his wife had few financial accounts because of their struggling socioeconomic situation. Unable to present a traditional relationship through their documents, Ramón, Cindy, Javier, and their partners were forced to perform their relationship.

It is important to recognize that all couples’ successful performance of their relationship was likely informed by their social positions as acculturated 1.5-generation young adults, many of whom had pursued higher education. This likely shielded some couples from suspicion and gave others the tools they needed to negotiate this complex interaction.

Presenting LGBQ Relationships in a Heterocentric Institution

Although heterosexual couples anticipated scrutiny, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer (LGBQ) couples expected additional complications as they prepared to

participate in a heterocentric institution. I spoke to three such couples as they were going through the legalization process. All were concerned about how homophobia may be infused into the process, both explicitly through prejudice and implicitly through the use of conventional relationship archetypes. At various points in the process, they realized that the immigration system was not prepared to deal with same-sex couples.

Crys Carvajal, a queer-identified U visa recipient, recalled how she and her partner faced homophobic microaggressions when initiating their application:

When I was calling the law office, I was like, “I’m going to be sponsoring my spouse when I’m doing my LPR thing [adjustment]. Her and I would like to come in for a consultation.” [They were] like, “Oh, when is your husband going to be available?” I’m like, “I told you that it was a woman already, right? Why do you keep pushing male pronouns?”

Crys was used to advocating for herself and had the cultural capital to challenge the office staff and complain to the managing attorney. Though these comments were angering and invalidating, her savvy ensured that they did not deter their application. Wearier LGBQ applicants, however, might abandon the legalization petition if they cannot even get their lawyer’s office to recognize the basic nature of their romantic relationship.

Some wrestled with building relationship evidence, especially if they are not fully open about their sexual identity or their relationship. A common strategy for navigating homophobia within Latino communities and families is to cover one’s sexual identity or relationship status.¹² This can present a problem because the USCIS field manual lists “family and/or friends [being] unaware of the marriage” as a potential indication of fraud.¹³ Evan Grande, a citizen petitioning for his husband, explained that his family does not know he is married: “I mean, I haven’t gone to the first step of telling them I’m even gay. So now that I just jumped to married. That’s gonna be a nice surprise for them.” He conceded that this could become a problem if their case was investigated: “I don’t really know exactly if immigration comes to talk to our parents unless they suspect fraud. So maybe then it might be a problem.” Evan’s partner, David Soto, explained that concealing their relationship from Evan’s family “just happens to be the process of our commitment to one another.” He recognized that individuals who are not familiar with the specific experiences of LGBQ Latinas/os/xs might be confused by their choice.

Though no couples had attended their USCIS interview at the time we talked, they feared that homophobia might endanger their petition. David hypothesized, “If we get someone that’s homophobic, they could give us a really bad attitude, they could judge us differently.” He posited that if homophobia and transphobia exist in schools and workplaces, it’s going to exist in USCIS offices. “So take the homophobia piece and somebody that’s already skeptical of the

system [looking for fraudulent relationships]. Those two factors could lead to something really bad.” LGBQ couples have long faced structural inequalities that routinely invalidate their relationships. With same-sex marriages being so recently recognized, it seems doubtful that they would be understood and affirmed by the state. Further, stereotypes about same-sex relationships as short-term sexual escapades can cause further damage by casting same-sex marriages as less real relative to heterosexual ones. Indeed, David’s lawyer confirmed these intersecting inequalities, telling them that “the officers are really digging deep and are asking a lot of questions” for LGBQ applicants.

To combat these compounded barriers, David and Evan’s lawyer encouraged them to keep “building your memories together” and develop institutionalized proof, like adding Evan to David’s apartment lease. They both worked diligently to document their relationship. Yet it seems probable that LGBQ couples who live in highly homophobic contexts may find it difficult to put official documents in both their names or may feel unsafe with a public performance of their relationship, preventing activities like taking pictures together.¹⁴ It may be additionally difficult for couples who do not conform to heteronormative relationship expectations.¹⁵

David was angry about having to validate his relationship. We talked for a long time about the pressure to prove his relationship with Evan: “It sucks that as LGBT folks going into this process, you have to legitimize your relationship . . . and your commitment to one another.” Though he credited this need to validate their relationship to their status as a same-sex couple, I recognized this anger from heterosexual couples and pushed him to explain what felt unique:

There’s a lot of privilege in being heterosexual and embarking on this [legalization] process. . . . [I] walk into that room already feeling like the underdog and for the longest time being discriminated for being LGBT, for being undocumented, for being Latino . . . having to validate your experience . . . so walking into that room, it’s already like boom, boom, boom, boom.

There are many similarities between the experiences of LGBQ and straight couples who are going through the legalization bureaucracy—both have to prove their relationship and can feel angry and overwhelmed. As David aptly noted, however, experiencing a lifetime of homophobia, and anticipating more from a USCIS agent, can add layers of difficulty and trauma for LGBQ applicants.

“PUNISHMENT”: VARIED CONSEQUENCES OF RISKING A 10-YEAR BAR

Most participants encountered the relatively straightforward legalization process described above because they had overstayed tourist visas or had long-pending legalization petitions that protected them from undergoing consular processing.

Although they stressed about gathering paperwork and feared suspicions of fraud, most were confident that their application would be approved. The smoothness of this process led Dolores Inda to think of her interview as “a joke” because “it was just sad and depressing that it was just so simple.” She and the others who were privileged to complete the process in the United States usually had permanent residency within six months of filing their application.

Six participants, however, underwent the more complicated and risky process of consular processing. They returned to Mexico to file their petition, not knowing if or when they would return because they faced a 10-year bar on their reentry. The only way to avoid this punishment was to prove that their 10-year absence would place “extreme hardship” on their citizen spouse, who would remain in the United States during their absence or live with them abroad. Extreme hardship is ambiguously defined as “hardship [that] must exceed that which is usual or expected” from any 10-year separation or move; expected emotional distress and financial deprivation are not sufficiently extreme.¹⁶ Their uncertain fate lay at the discretion of whichever immigration agent pulled their case. Given the high risks and difficulty proving *extreme* hardship, few pursue this route; only about 65,000 consular cases were processed in 2010–15.¹⁷ Those who take the risk often have strong cases; close to 80 percent of these waiver petitions were approved.¹⁸ I trace three successful cases here to show the diverging strategies for undergoing this process and how each had different consequences.

Going Together: Blanca and Pedro's Material Risks

After eight years of marriage, Blanca Marín and her citizen husband, Pedro, finally decided to risk the 10-year bar to pursue her legalization. Their lawyer was confident that their legalization application would be approved but felt they had little to demonstrate extreme hardship. Blanca remembered, “[The lawyer] said there was a good risk that they could leave me there for a couple of years, the maximum 10 years.”

Despite the risks, they felt that this was a necessary step to “succeed together as a couple.” Unlike most of my participants, Blanca had migrated at age 15 and fondly remembered life in Mexico and had strong ties to her family there.¹⁹ They decided that they would travel together, so that her husband “could stay with me” and she could continue to care for their two children. They spent two years saving up money so that they could afford living expenses for the first few months while they looked for jobs.

Luckily, Blanca's application was processed quickly, and her waiver petition was approved. She recounted their risky move as more like an extended two-month vacation. They had saved enough that neither had started to look for work. They never got around to enrolling their children in school. Because they were not gone that long, their reintegration after returning to the United States was

relatively easy since they were able to return to their old jobs—she as a sales agent and he as a security guard. Theirs was truly a best-case scenario.

Blanca's process proceeded quickly and successfully. Their waiver, however, could have easily been denied. If this had happened, her family likely would have faced financial, educational, and emotional trauma. Given the state of the Mexican economy, Blanca and Pedro would probably have been unable to find well-paying jobs to sustain them once their savings ran out. Their children stumbled with Spanish, and she believed that it would have been hard for them to go to a school where they would have to speak a "new language." Indeed, journalists and scholars confirm that Mexican schools are unprepared to support the children of returnees who have had no formal Spanish-language instruction.²⁰ Further, these children have a hard time adjusting to the new cultural context and suffer emotional trauma from leaving their U.S. lives behind.²¹

Going Alone: Nicolás and Elisa's Emotional Strain

Unlike Blanca, Nicolás Fernandez chose to travel alone, risking the emotional trauma of family separation. Nicolás decided to finally get his "stuff straightened out" when Elisa became pregnant. They married and prepared the application as they awaited the birth of their son. A lawyer prepared their hardship statement, weaving together how Elisa would struggle to care for both their infant son and Nicolás's parents, who had health problems.

Tears welled in Elisa's eyes as she remembered Nicolás boarding a bus to Mexico. Her voice shook: "I've always thought of myself as a strong person, but when he got on that bus, I was like, 'What if something [happens]?' . . . And you start thinking if anything happens to him, I would have rather he'd been here. Undocumented, but here. So that was scary, that was really scary." She kept these fears bottled up inside because she "didn't want [Nicolás] to worry" and felt "helplessness . . . 'cause nothing is in your hands at that very moment. You just have to wait and see."

Elisa felt lucky to be in a relatively comfortable situation while Nicolás was gone. She had graduated from college and was working for an international firm that paid well enough to sustain them. She lived with Nicolás's parents, who helped with childcare and household activities. But she also felt stuck. She "hated" her job but had to continue: "I kept thinking like, Ah, maybe if I get a flat tire or little small accident, maybe I won't have to go to work. But I had to 'cause I had responsibilities and he was out in Mexico." This also had longer-term consequences: she "put things on hold" and delayed her return to school to obtain her teaching credential and master's degree.

While Nicolás missed Elisa for the three months he was in Mexico, he remembered that the worst part was being unable to see his son: "I left and he was already verbalizing, but not like articulate. And then I would Skype with him and all the

things he would say! And I'm like, Oh my God, I'm missing all this. It was probably by far one of the most difficult things to try to endure." Children learn new skills every day, and their one-and-half-year-old son grew into an entirely different person during his absence. Elisa witnessed how this was also hard on their son: "He knew that his dad was gone, and but he was still small enough where he'd get distracted with any little thing. But there was definitely times [when he was like,] 'Where is dad?' Or when he came back, he [our son] was like . . . 'Who are you?'"

In the end, Elisa and Nicolás felt that the legalization process had punished their whole family. They count themselves lucky that their waiver was approved, their separation lasted *only* three months, and their son was so young that he does not remember. Still, three years later, the pain of their separation was palpable and had shaped their family's trajectory.

Stuck: Ricky and Isabel's Two-Year Pause

When Ricky Montoya left for Mexico, he expected a process much like Nicolás's. He began the process at the consulate and was referred to a psychologist as part of his medical exam: "Since I have dreadlocks, they gave me a big old hard time. . . . I got a lady and she was just asking me about why I have dreadlocks, if I have a drug problem, if I was in a gang. All this nonsense that didn't relate to me." While this was annoying, he didn't think it was a problem. Two days later he went to his interview, in which the immigration agent flatly told him, "'Your punishment for this is one year.' And I was just shocked. I was like, for why? . . . He was just like, 'Well, I don't know. It's not my fault. I'm sorry. According to the person that interviewed you, she thinks that you have a drug problem.'" Confirmed drug use would have made Ricky inadmissible. It seems most likely that the immigration officer adjudicating Ricky's case used his discretion to allow him to reapply in one year if he could prove he was clean. He immediately regretted their decision to be counseled by a *notario*, a notary public who illegally practices law, often leading to grievous errors like this one. His wife, Isabel, hired a real immigration lawyer, only to learn they had no legal recourse. They resigned to spending a year apart before they could reinstate his petition.

When I interviewed Isabel, they were almost two years into their separation. Before we even got settled for the interview, she launched into the saga. She was upbeat, but her pain was unmistakable. "We've had some arguments and ups and downs, just from the pain of being separated. There's times where I'm broke and I would get angry at him 'cause if he were here working, it wouldn't be so hard on me." She talked about "being lonely" and "not being able to do the same things you used to do when you were together." Further, their separation set them "behind in our life," and she hinted that she had wanted children by now since she was in her late 20s.

On a Skype call with Ricky, he sighed heavily when I asked how they managed the separation:

She's lonely. . . . I talk to her every night. But there's points where she breaks and she just feels like she can't do it anymore. And recently, she's been telling me that she can't handle anymore being lonely, she wants to come live over here with me. She wants to pretty much drop her whole life over there. . . . It's just hard to keep [telling] her to have patience, just try to keep her calm.

As part of the process of establishing "extreme hardship" for their waiver petition, Isabel had visited a psychologist to confirm a diagnosis of depression and anxiety. Acknowledging that this makes their case stronger, Ricky still felt "awful. I feel like [her pain is] all my fault."

Throughout our conversation, Ricky continually referred to the financial burden the process placed on Isabel. He concluded that he is not a good husband: "I think to be a good husband, obviously you need to be the man in the relationship. And pay the bills. And you know, be there with your wife when she needs you." He sent her the money he earned working construction, but it was not much. He admitted that when work slows down, "I get super depressed. And anxious. There's been five, six times where I've been thinking I'm just going to go and try to cross illegally."

They clung to the hope that they would be separated only a few more months. His reinterview went well, and they had recently been allowed to submit their 10-year bar waiver. Three months after I interviewed them, Ricky's petition was approved, and he returned home. Both were trying to look on the bright side when I spoke to them a few months after his return. Their readjustment seemed to meet Isabel's early expectations: "I think our relationship will be different in a positive way. I think we'll be a lot stronger, a lot more aware of the way the world works. And we'll just appreciate each other a lot more." They were spending a lot of time together—eating breakfast, going out, and reconnecting with friends and family.

Yet negative consequences loomed. Ricky's long absence and limited employment history in a tight job market meant that he was still unemployed after almost two months of looking. Having been pretty quiet, he exploded when we started talking about their financial situation: "Right now, I still feel frustrated. . . . I still feel how I used to feel before I left. She's still paying for rent and everything. And I want to help her. And it sucks because like I say, it's all still a waiting game. A waiting game that's still not over." He recounted how he had been applying for countless jobs and not getting called back for even minimum-wage jobs at chain stores like Target. While Isabel continued to work at her office job, she admitted, "Now I'm spending more money on food 'cause I have another mouth [to feed]. The money is going quicker now that he's here than it did before."

In the midst of Ricky's continuing frustration with being unable to financially provide, these barriers will likely pose challenges to their family formation. They insisted that their relationship survived their separation unscathed:

Isabel: I feel like we just kind of waited for each other, though.

Laura: Like life stopped?

Isabel: Yeah.

Ricky: That's the way I see everyone too. I came back and I thought everything was going to be different, friends and things.
Everyone's the same—just apparently everyone has kids now.

I asked if they had thought about becoming parents. Ricky quickly and definitively responded no, but Isabel hedged: "I kind of get the baby fever." Ricky referenced their financial instability: "I need to get my life back on the—" before Isabel jumped in, "That's mainly why." Immigration law delayed their having children for two years while Ricky was out of the country and they continued to postpone as they picked up the pieces.

All these cases could have easily gone another way. Rejection would have left families to choose between abandoning the United States or undergoing long-term separation, both options compromising all family members' economic and socioemotional stability.

UNANTICIPATED CONSEQUENCES

Legalization through marriage offers an opportunity to transform one's life circumstances—but it ties this to a sustained romantic relationship. Couples who successfully navigated the immigration bureaucracy found that their lives improved to varying extents after legalizing the undocumented partner's status. Doors opened to educational and employment opportunities, allowing some to pursue upward mobility, while others struggled to find their way back to school or into better jobs. Some felt their fears of deportation melt away, while others suffered "posttraumatic stress" from a lifetime of surveillance. Some continued to avoid bars and other age-restricted spaces, while others joyfully entered. Despite the material, psychological, and social benefits of legalization, it carried unanticipated effects, often at a cost to their relationships.

Positive Impacts: Building Stronger and More Stable Partnerships

Recently legalized young adults who had already completed their higher education or were on the brink of career opportunities were best positioned to foster their family's collective mobility. Three years after his legalization, Nicolás Fernandez and his wife were solidly middle class. Before adjusting his status, Nicolás had graduated from college but continued to work two jobs at a gas

station and a fast-food restaurant. As a permanent resident, he got a job with an after-school program and returned to school to pursue a teaching credential and a master's degree in education. He quickly found a full-time job as a teacher and began earning about \$45,000 a year. With Nicolás making a decent salary, Elisa quit her job to pursue her teaching credential. Reflecting on these transitions, Nicolás exclaimed that their economic situation was "a billion times better!" He hypothesized that both their careers and joint economic situation would have suffered if he had not legalized; he could not earn that much while remaining undocumented, and they wouldn't have been able to afford Elisa's returning to school. Further, he suspected that a worse economic situation would have prevented them from having a second child. Nicolás was able to achieve such rapid upward mobility thanks to his pursuit of higher education; others, particularly those with limited education, saw less.

The economic mobility and physical security that accompanies legalization also allows couples to plan for their future together. Economic stability relieved financial stress while also allowing couples to plan for their financial future, like buying a house and saving for retirement. Arturo Molina connected this to his relatively low risk of deportation.²² He no longer felt "stuck in that position of like, we can't plan for the future because we don't know . . . if you will be here then."

Going through the legalization process can also offer couples an opportunity to bond. Recalling their application efforts, Arturo Molina felt that "it was special. We are both doing it together and both going to the interviews or to the [lawyer's] appointments to put it together. It was nice. I think we got to learn a little bit more about our families." Filling out mundane paperwork and looking for documents allowed them to ask questions about their past and their families. According to his wife, Nicole, the interview also helped her better understand his life as an undocumented immigrant. She recounted how the immigration officer hounded Arturo for having tickets for driving without a license. He sat there silently while Nicole got increasingly "pissed off. Is this how we're treating people? . . . But then I realized this is how these [undocumented] people are treated all the time. This is just the normal." Witnessing this interaction, Nicole better understood Arturo's previous experiences and his undocumented family members' outlooks. Although it was a negative experience, they both focused on small instances in which they were brought closer, united against a common enemy—the U.S. immigration system.

Partners often grew closer when they shared in the emotional labor of the process. Crys Carvajal, a formerly undocumented woman who was recently granted a U visa, was preparing to petition for the legalization of her undocumented partner, Monica Zambrano.²³ I asked Monica how she felt about this prospect: "I have a lot of feelings," she joked. As we laughed, her jaw began to tremble, and tears welled in her eyes: "She's really great at supporting me and helping me work through my feelings and my concerns about what this means."

Crys knew the emotional turbulence well from her own experiences applying for a U visa, grappling with the rollercoaster of emotions that accompanied her transition out of undocumented status. This pushed her to support Monica through the process. In one instance, Crys took the day off to accompany Monica to an appointment with the lawyer, despite her insistence that she could go alone. As expected, Crys saw Monica's "anxiety building up in her" as they waited in the office: "We couldn't even talk. It was just silence." Anticipating this, Crys had helped Monica develop a list of questions, all of which Monica promptly forgot to ask until Crys gently reminded her. Throughout the process, Crys provided key forms of instrumental and emotional support that helped Monica feel comfortable and prepared. Though most petitioners did not have Crys's intimate experience with the immigration system, a few other partners tried to actively support their undocumented partner and engage in the process, bringing them closer together.

Negative Impacts: New Responsibilities and Haunted Relationships

Linking legal status to the establishment and maintenance of a marriage also had negative consequences. Any marriage can be troubled with instances of regret, unrealized goals, and conflict. Here, though, immigration law shaded partners' understanding of these struggles. This was particularly common in fast-forwarded or strategic relationships in which legalization reshaped their relationship trajectory. In most cases, immigration law created enduring consequences by limiting one's ability to pursue new opportunities, creating emotional baggage that emerged at times of conflict, and stunting romantic lives.

"Marriage Took Over": Limiting the Pursuit of New Opportunities. Legalizing through marriage opened up opportunities for upward mobility while also creating competing responsibilities. In most cases, undocumented young adults' desperation mounted as they approached critical life junctures, like finishing college. Javier Espinoza spoke longingly of finishing a few remaining classes to obtain his bachelor's degree; this was one of the main reasons he chose to marry. His goal, however, remained unrealized after five years primarily because "I was also married. So marriage took over. As supportive as my wife has been and as amazing as she is, the fact that I'm married . . . I had to work." He turned his attention away from school, which would have been more affordable because of his newfound ability to access financial aid. Instead, he threw himself into his new job as a financial planner, often working late. This sense of responsibility also meant that Javier could not travel, even though he could now leave the country. He laughingly quoted his wife: "Pues, paga los billes y paga la luz [Well, you gotta pay the bills and pay the electricity]." He softly added, "Man, that sucks I can't really travel the world."

Citizen partners shared these newfound responsibilities. Having married in her early 20s, Sofi Castellanos believed she and her husband would have been able to “grow up a little bit more” if they had waited longer:

I think we built our careers while being married. And maybe [it would be better if] we would've done it previous to [getting married]. . . . [So] he doesn't have to sit at the office at six o'clock thinking, “Oh my gosh, I have to go home to my wife and my dogs.” [Laughs.] . . . He could've just stayed focused on his job and I could've done the same. Instead of [me] being at work and thinking, “Oh my gosh, I have to go back home and cook and do this and do that.”

Notably, Sofi said that she *and* her husband, Santos, had to navigate these new competing demands. Most dual-career families struggle to balance their career with family life.²⁴ But couples directly attributed these frustrations to the power that immigration law held over their marriage decisions, forcing them to take on marriage responsibilities prematurely.

By contrast, those who legalized their status through long-awaited extended family petitions were significantly more likely to pursue new opportunities. Alejandra Sanchez legalized her status as a child dependent on a petition that her father's employer filed in the 1990s. She was 20 and halfway through college. Having legal status paved the way for completing college and pursuing several career-relevant jobs. With no familial responsibilities, she simply quit her job when she was ready to get her master's degree and moved to the East Coast to enroll in a top program.

This differs sharply from those who legalized through marriage. For Regina Castro, marriage meant that she had to “plan her future in conjunction with” her husband's. Though she legalized around the same point in her life as Alejandra, doing so through marriage limited her pursuit of various educational and career opportunities. When she pursued opportunities, it stressed their relationship as they found themselves living on opposite sides of the country. When they separated, almost five years later, she felt as if it lifted a “weight off her shoulders,” because now she could move wholeheartedly in new directions, without feeling guilty for not supporting her husband's goals.

“Did You Marry Me for the Papers?” Emotional Baggage from the Marriage Myth. When couples are in the midst of establishing their life together, the marriage myth often reemerges in times of conflict. For Javier, working long hours to take advantage of his newly legal status showed his commitment to ensuring their financial stability. Yet his wife struggled to understand why he was never home. He recalled a fight: “She was like, ‘You abandoned me. You don't have time for me no more. Did you marry me for the papers?’” While any partner may feel abandoned in such a situation, Javier's wife questioned the strategic timing of

their marriage, showing how they continued to grapple with how immigration law molded their relationship.

Marriage myth messages often exacerbated underlying relationship conflict. Elena Loera married her citizen partner after five years and became a conditional permanent resident about eight months before our second interview. This had been transformative: “By him marrying me, . . . [it] gave me wings to be better.” A senior in college, Elena was able to accept a prestigious engineering internship. She spent substantial time at school studying and participating in career-building activities to make up for her previous lack of opportunities. She knew this would be the only way to succeed as a woman of color in a field dominated by white men. These activities, however, created marital problems: “Now that [opportunities are] there, it’s like he can’t deal with them.” With him not pursuing college, she recognized that their prospects would diverge: “I mean, he works, but . . . for a guy to know ‘my wife’s gonna make more money than me.’ That’s a threat to them.” Although she had been attending school throughout their relationship, gaining legal status gave her the wings that would allow her to fly farther than him. He seemed to resent that reality.

Elena recalled how her husband began relying on marriage myths as their relationship soured. She sighed, “He was the one that would encourage me. . . . But now it’s like he doesn’t wanna be with me. He said I only married him just for the papers.” This hurt her deeply because she had delayed their marriage specifically to avoid these accusations: “He offered at the beginning, four months into our relationship. And I said no. . . . I’d [rather] struggle by myself forever. I would never marry for that. So him knowing that and telling me I did it just for that, it breaks my heart.” Unable to recover from these accusations, they separated.

While complications emerged early in Javier and Elena’s marriages, Santos explained that these feelings could endure. He recalled that they would have “small fights day in, day out” about “married couple stuff,” and “after two, three years, you just get fed up.” These fights led them to question their relationship: “At some point, you think it’s not going to work out, so you start questioning what went wrong. And obviously one of the options she’s going to think is ‘Well, maybe you’re not in it. He just wanted this [legalization]. So now you got it, you can walk away.’” He explained that these accusations leave him “very frustrated,” because “you don’t know what to say because how can I prove it wrong?” He continued, “If I do walk away, we do split up, people are gonna think that [it was for papers].” Both were still negotiating these suspicions years into their marriage and past the point at which Santos needed to remain married for legalization purposes.

“Love Life on Hold”: Stunted Love in Fast-Forwarded and Strategic Relationships. Fast-forwarding a romantic relationship or engaging in a strategic relationship produced additional romantic consequences. One participant who had

fast-forwarded his relationship believed that this had prevented him from fully evaluating if this was the right relationship. Marrying in their early 20s, straight out of college, meant that they had not grown into their adult selves:

I don't think she ever saw me as an adult until we were living together, which is kind of too late. Right? So you had that growing pain, a lot of conflict. [If] we would've waited two years, when I was 25 [or] 26 . . . I would've learned everything I know now about myself. . . . She would have seen that and been like, I'm in or I'm out. And it would've been the same for me.

He knew this when they married but rationalized it: "You're always going to lose in life. So, you know, the best decision is the decision that gives you the least losses." Surprised, I asked if he felt he had settled; was his marriage just about minimizing loss? He responded bluntly, "That's correct." Glancing across the coffee shop at his wife, he added, "Don't tell her."

Those in strategic marriages found that this arrangement limited both partners' pursuit of true romantic relationships. Dulce Puente recounted how a man she was interested in was unwilling to overlook her strategic marriage: "I actually told him that I was still married. He was Christian, and he just felt that it wasn't right, so he left." Lena Gomez avoided dating until she became a citizen because she felt her situation was too difficult to explain: "I did briefly date someone, two people. . . . They get a little jealous at the beginning and kind of like, 'Are you sure there's nothing else going on?'" Lena reflected on whether this also affected her friend and husband: "I feel like it's harder for him, which kind of sucks. Like, he doesn't tell people he dates that we're married. And [even] then I remember when he was dating this girl, she came over to the house [and] she was like, 'Your roommate's a girl?'" Lena's very presence created problems.

In some cases, strategic marriages can also prevent more serious relationships. Dulce was now dating someone who accepted her marriage but felt "like it can't get serious just because of that. I feel like I can't start something new until I end that chapter. . . . So it kinda puts my love life on hold." Worried about getting divorced too soon after the removal of the conditions from her permanent residency, she continued to live her romantic life in the shadows of an immigration policy that should have led to her social integration. Similarly, Lena's boyfriend remarked that her strategic marriage disrupted their marriage prospects: "First she has to get divorced before that can happen and maybe [then] I'll start thinking about time."

Having to maintain the illusion of a marriage for two years can come with heavy social costs. Miriam Velez explained how her fear of detection by immigration officials led her to socially withdraw:

I don't even have a Facebook account because I'm so afraid that someone is gonna find out something. I don't really talk to people at work about my personal life.

I don't really talk to my friends about things that have to do with this. So it's kind of like . . . you're keeping secrets from one person and keeping secrets from others, it's very difficult.

She noted that her friends do not know that she is married and think she lives with a friend. She minimized the lies and half-truths by avoiding others. Lena similarly watched her digital footprint: "Hell no, I can't put anything on my Facebook about any of that stuff. I'm very careful about that, I'm very careful about pictures, I'm very careful about texts, I'm very careful about emails." While it is unclear if this suspicion was warranted during their applications, USCIS announced in September 2017 that it will collect social media data for all immigrants entering the country and applying for permanent residence or naturalization.²⁵ This policy will likely increase social costs.

CONCLUSION

U.S. immigration law purports to value familial relationships, but regulations and practices simultaneously disrupt families. Contemporary immigration, legalization, and deportation policies often separate family members, producing disastrous economic, social, and emotional consequences. I have shown here that consequences even arise in the best-case scenarios of people who experience relatively easy transitions into legality.

Mirroring previous findings by Cecilia Menjívar and Sarah Lakhani, I find that immigration law produces transformative effects in undocumented young adults' family structures, specifically shaping their marriage decisions.²⁶ These effects also extend into relationships' psychosocial aspects. Relationships are stressed in a myriad of ways when they become the key to legal status and the opportunities it brings. Undocumented young adults and their citizen partners repeatedly acknowledge the connections between marriage and legalization. Laws forced couples to fast-forward relationships, sacrifice their social and romantic lives for a strategic marriage, or continually validate their long-term romantic relationships. The legalization process required both undocumented and citizen individuals to make sacrifices, suffer indignities, and move their relationships in directions they may not be ready for. Although legalization improves the lives of undocumented young adults and their loved ones, these benefits come with enduring psychosocial costs.