

## “It’s a Constant Struggle”

### *Becoming and Being Parents*

*[I kept telling myself], “I don’t want to have a baby.” . . . [Then I thought] if I had papers, how do I see myself? I was like, I definitely see myself with a baby by 29. . . . That fear and guilt feeling [from being undocumented] was preventing me from having the future that I wanted.*

—LUIS ESCOBAR

In their late 20s, Luis and his wife wanted a child, but he still felt unprepared for fatherhood. His undocumented status left him unable to find stable, well-paid employment, even after obtaining a college degree. Unable to provide, Luis often felt like a bad husband, and he feared things would only get worse with fatherhood. He put it simply: “You do feel like a drag if you’re undocumented.” Aware that he may never feel prepared, he decided not to let his undocumented status hold him back. Their daughter was a little over a year old by the time we first talked.

Luis made it painfully clear that his fears were being realized. They struggled financially as he pieced together part-time jobs: working at a restaurant, teaching Zumba exercise classes, coaching children’s acting and dance classes, and selling Herbalife products. He had never recovered from being fired after his longtime employer tried to confirm his employment eligibility, pushing him to move his wife and infant daughter into a motor home in his in-laws’ backyard. When I asked if being undocumented affected his ability to be a good father, he made an exception for his undocumented status: “No, no, when you put all of our restrictions aside, which is money, life, car, and bills . . . outside restrictions, that doesn’t make anyone better or less of a mother or father. So, I feel like I’m the best father ever. And I’m gonna keep striving to be that.” But he admitted that it was difficult: “The way society has treated me [as an undocumented immigrant], it’s a constant struggle to find a time to be with her and make enough money. And keep looking for the jobs that are gonna take me and the stress of not knowing what’s gonna happen in the future.” Luis was left feeling like a failure.

Previous research on mixed-status families has focused on how parental undocumented status constrains children's development.<sup>1</sup> I turn attention to parents to explore how these shared consequences affect their experiences. Luis and the 43 other undocumented parents I spoke to highlighted that immigration policies shaded their transition to parenthood. Restricted employment options, limited incomes, and inadequate time produced family-level economic instability. These material barriers collided with intensive parenting ideology. Grounded in middle-class realities, these ideals demand the investment of material and emotional resources to ensure children's proper development and future mobility. They are also tightly intertwined with gendered expectations: mothers are expected to perform intensive care work, while fathers provide financial support. Though there are class differences between parents' understanding of and methods for intensive parenting, they share an overarching commitment to prioritizing their children's needs and promoting children's future mobility.<sup>2</sup>

The parents I spoke to mostly had citizen children under age 10. They aspired to advance this next generation's upward mobility by providing a stable childhood: meeting their children's basic needs, spending time with them, and providing developmental opportunities to ensure future success. Immigration policies prevented some from feeling prepared to meet these ideals, disrupting their transition to parenthood. Material barriers and cultural ideals intertwined to shape the experiences of parents and parents-to-be, leaving many to feel inadequate. While receiving DACA opened up opportunities for improved family stability, these transformations were not guaranteed. Socioemotional barriers emerged throughout the transition to parenthood as undocumented young adults attempted to meet parenting ideals and realized they could not live up to their vision of what parenting should be.

“I WANT TO BE ABLE TO GIVE MY KID A GOOD LIFE”:  
DECIDING TO BECOME A PARENT

The transition to parenthood begins with the decision to have a child. Some participants intentionally pursued parenthood, while others welcomed unplanned pregnancies. Often they were in established romantic partnerships and felt socially and emotionally ready to become a parent. Others delayed; like their citizen peers, they aimed for financial and relationship stability first.<sup>3</sup> Many identified ideal childbearing ages; often this aligned with educational attainment so that those who were pursuing higher education imagined becoming a parent once they completed their education and established financial stability. Wrapped into their decisions was the reality that undocumented status may complicate their ability to live up to parenting ideals. As they contemplated this transition, they all considered how immigration policies would affect their ability to parent, decided if they

would allow this to influence their decision to have children, and identified how they would negotiate economic instability.

*Delaying Parenting, Seeking Stability*

Many undocumented young adults who were not parents but wanted children were discouraged by the instability their undocumented status created. This reflects previous work that finds that the implementation of local and state immigration enforcement lowered childbearing among undocumented women by 6.3 percent.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, I find that limited incomes and deportability drive parenting delays; this group often longs first for the stability provided by legalization.

Most pointed to financial concerns. Enrique Escobar, 26 at the time of his first interview, asserted that he had wanted children by the time he turned 25. He pushed his timeline back to 30 so that “hopefully by then I got my stuff set and I got a good job.” He reflected on whether he would have children while still undocumented:

*Enrique:* I mean, it’s possible to bring out a decent living, like you will be able to at least eat. But unfortunately [you need] to have papers to provide a better living. . . . I have to pay rent, I have to pay the phone, I have to pay car insurance, everything. So it’s not like there is a lot of money. . . . And then when you have kids, then it’s way more money. It would be way harder to not have papers. You probably need to do three jobs or something. . . . With three jobs you probably build up [enough income] to [equal] one of the good jobs.

*Laura:* You think you would still have kids while being undocumented?

*Enrique:* I don’t want to. I don’t want to.

Despite having worked his way up to manager at a tire shop and earning a little over \$20,000 a year, Enrique did not feel stable enough to support a family.

Some considered the possibility of deportation and family separation. Gabi Rivas Silva, in her late 20s and married for 10 years, commented, “If I had a kid right now, and we were going through this immigration issue, and I were to get deported, that wouldn’t be good. . . . I just kind of think, once my life is stable—or if it ever is stable—then maybe [we’ll have kids]. But at this time, no.” She recited a statistic she heard recently: “There’s like 50,000 kids in foster care right now whose parents got deported.” She acknowledged that most people “never sit there and think, What would happen to my kid if I were to get deported?” But this report had confirmed for her that she did not want to raise children while remaining undocumented: “You don’t want to make your kids suffer. You don’t want them to be going through that. It would be horrible.”

These young adults actively delayed parenthood. While some were inconsistent or practiced ineffective forms of birth control, those committed to delaying parenthood readily accessed and used contraception.<sup>5</sup> One reported having an abortion. In her early 20s, Daniela Sanchez was struggling to pursue community college and could find work only for a few hours a week. When we began to talk about her plans for having children, she lowered her voice so that her mom wouldn't hear from the next room. She rounded her hand over her belly and mouthed, "I was pregnant." She whispered,

For me, in my situation, what I had to offer, I felt like there's no way [I could have a baby]. . . . It was the hardest thing I've done so far. . . . Just being undocumented, any situation it just makes it a little harder for anything. When you're dealing with your own life, you work it through. But when you have somebody else and . . . their life is depending on you, you can't just be [like], "Oh, we'll just see what happens."

Ultimately, her decision was driven by fear that her child would be drawn into a shared world of uncertainty.

#### *Embracing Parenthood, Negotiating Instability*

Conversely, a number of parents shared that they did not think about their immigration status as a barrier as they broached parenthood. Take three examples:

*Nancy Ortega:* Five years after living together, that's when we decided it was time. . . . [We] just felt like we wanted a baby with that person.

*Maria Loya:* I don't really think like that [about my status]. That doesn't really come to my mind. I just know that I want to have kids like everybody does.

*Aaron Ortiz:* You only live once, you know. You can't wait on the government to live your life. [If] you wait on the government—it's like waiting for Jesus Christ, he might never come back. *[Laughs.]*

These parents did not perceive their status as an insurmountable barrier to parenting. In fact, many had previously refused to allow immigration policies to alter their family formation, rejecting marriage myths and partnering with other undocumented immigrants. Feeling otherwise ready to have children because of their age and relationship commitment, some actively pursued parenthood (like Nancy), while others welcomed an unplanned pregnancy (like Aaron). Many, like Maria and her partner, framed their pregnancy as a combination of the two: a planned surprise, since they had been talking about having a baby but had not intentionally pursued pregnancy.

Others delayed parenthood until forced to decide if they would let their immigration status dictate this aspect of their life. Celia Alvarez remembered turning 27:

My family was like, “Oh, you’re getting old, you know. You’re falling behind. You should have a kid already. You’re married, you have a house.” But I’m like, “How am I gonna have a kid if I’m undocumented?” [My family says], “You don’t need to have papers to have a kid.” And I’m like, “No, but I want to be able to give my kid a good life. And if you’re undocumented you can’t do that.” So they’re like, “So that’s why you’re not gonna have kids?” And I started thinking, Why am I gonna have this ruin my life? I gotta fight it. So then I decided to have a kid.

Celia initially reacted much like those who were delaying—she worried that her status would limit her ability to provide a stable life for her child. While fear dictated her initial decision, later conversations made her reconsider her position and pushed her to embrace parenthood.

Despite refusing to let immigration policies control their childbearing decisions, these parents-to-be still had to devise strategies to negotiate status-related instability. When they decided to have children, Nancy and her partner were both making below minimum wage. To prepare for the expenses and her unpaid maternity leave, Nancy remembered that they “tried to save up as much as we possibly could” in order to feel ready. In a subsequent pregnancy, her partner took on a second full-time job to make up for her lost income. Although most would-be parents have to consider financial costs, undocumented parents see financial stability as elusive because of legally embedded barriers to employment and economic mobility.

#### “I’M MORE AWARE OF IT”: EMERGING LIMITATIONS DURING PREGNANCY

Pregnancy was a key turning point when parents were forced to recognize that immigration policies have family-level effects. This deeply influenced participants’ feelings when expecting a child. I interviewed Abby Zamora a few weeks after she found out that she was pregnant. Having kids “was something that I wanted” but “it was unexpected.” She lamented, “I wanna give my child a better future. . . . [I] cry about it. I’m more aware of it [my undocumented status] now than before. . . . It kind of puts me feeling kind of blue.” She aspired to use her recently completed GED to start community college and improve her employment opportunities so “I could provide for my kid better.” Abby was one of the few women who felt acutely aware of the limitations her status would place on parenting. In most cases, parents-to-be realized that their undocumented status would present material barriers as they negotiated pregnancy-related social service institutions without legal status.

### *Prenatal Care*

Although immigration status had varying impacts on individuals' feelings about having a baby, all 30 undocumented mothers I spoke to asserted that it had not affected basic access to prenatal care. California provides all low-income women, regardless of status, with restricted-scope medical insurance that covers pregnancy-related services.<sup>6</sup> Sylvia Cortez remembered,

[I was talking to] my friend who was pregnant before me. . . . I'm like, "What am I gonna do? I don't have money for my pregnancy or anything like that, no medical [insurance]." They're like, "Oh, they help you in the clinic. . . . They get you Medi-Cal." . . . They did help me. They gave me some program to apply and see if I was eligible.

Embedded in undocumented social networks and a medical system prepared to offer social services to low-income and undocumented mothers, none reported difficulties obtaining Medi-Cal coverage.

Yet some believed that they received unequal care. Estefania Gutierrez-Estrada, a 31-year-old college graduate who was eight months pregnant with her second son, compared her prenatal experiences to that of her citizen friends: "They're always posting [on Facebook] about my doctor. He saw me and we're gonna have another ultrasound. And I only get limited, I only get like two or three throughout my whole pregnancy.<sup>7</sup> And us obviously having to wait for hours before the doctor would see us. It was kind of sad." Pregnant with her fourth child, Janet Godinez recounted negative treatment from the office staff at a recent checkup. Even though she called ahead to confirm, the receptionist insisted when she arrived that she did not have an appointment and refused to let her inside the clinic. This happened so often that Janet had learned to get the name of the person she spoke to in case there were problems when she arrived: "It frustrates me! Because they think, OK. Since they don't have a status or a Social or they're not from there, we're gonna treat her like that." While low-income citizen mothers are seen in these same clinics and share these experiences, undocumented mothers attributed these affronts to their immigration status.

Estefania, Janet, and other mothers began to feel that their immigration status was already shaping their parenting, preventing them from caring for their babies before birth. Scarce ultrasounds were a common complaint. Filling this vacuum were commercial ultrasound services. When I shared that I was also pregnant, several expectant parents asked me if I had gotten ultrasounds "at the mall." Seeing my confusion, Daniela Sanchez, who was six months pregnant, quickly pulled out a brochure showing me a variety of packages in which customers could watch ultrasound videos and buy photos and merchandise. She had her eye on a teddy bear that would play audio of her son's heartbeat. While all parents, regardless of status, long for opportunities to bond with their unborn children, undocumented

parents perceive their inability to access these opportunities as tied to their status and inability to acquire higher-quality insurance.

Concerns about unequal access were more pronounced when parents tried to obtain specialized care. Julián Salinas recalled wanting alternative childbirth options after watching the documentary *The Business of Being Born*. Filled with fears about skyrocketing medical interventions, forced C-sections, and negative outcomes associated with common birthing drugs, they wanted a home birth under the care of a doula and midwife. This was not covered by their insurance, and their lack of funds forced them to have their son in a clinical setting.

Similar concerns arose when participants faced infertility. Daniela Sanchez recounted her health care experiences after a doctor diagnosed fertility issues: “I was kind of upset for a little bit. Because I was like, Why would they say that? Why wouldn’t they make sure before they put somebody through this?” When I asked for clarification, she rolled her eyes and pointed to her pregnant belly, “Obviously they weren’t sure because they were wrong.”

Every time you go, you get a different doctor. So the first doctor that told me about it didn’t even really tell me about it. She gave me a Post-It with the name of it—polycystic ovarian syndrome. She said we found this in your test. Again, they’re trying to rush you. . . . But when I got home and googled it, I was like, “Oh my gosh!” And literally the first thing you read is “leading cause of infertility.” . . . But then the third doctor was like, “Well, it’s not a for-sure thing, you still have these options.”

Daniela also believed that her status would have prevented her from pursuing fertility treatments *if* she had needed them. Indeed, Rosa Lopez, the citizen spouse of a recently legalized participant, noted the high cost of her fertility treatments. She and her husband believed that the cost and lack of medical coverage would have prevented them from pursuing treatments if either of them had remained undocumented. Further, the high costs of adoption, in vitro fertilization, and surrogacy raise similar barriers for undocumented members of LGBTQ couples who desired to have children.

### *Maternity Leave*

Maternity leave was also infused with status-related concerns. Celia Alvarez, who had her daughter a few months before our first interview, remembered thinking that her undocumented status made her ineligible for maternity leave. She recounted the stress:

I was always afraid of going on maternity leave. You have to turn in paperwork, and I’m like, What if they ask for more stuff [like a Social Security card]? . . . And I talked to some of my coworkers, and they were like, “Oh, I have a friend that works in the office, let me ask her.” So my coworker would ask her, “Hey, I have a friend that this, this, and that,” but they wouldn’t say it was me just in case. And then the friend would be like, “Oh, don’t worry about it. She could do it.”

A counselor at the clinic also assured her, “Oh, don’t worry. We deal with cases like that all the time.”

All the women I spoke to had successfully claimed their right to maternity leave, but their status precipitated financial concerns. Janet Godinez noted that it was unpaid. Currently on maternity leave from her job as an office assistant, she shared, “I feel good because I know that when I go back, I’m gonna have my job. I have my job secure. But at the same time, I don’t have money. I can’t go to the unemployment or disability to help me with something.” This prevented some from taking the full 12 weeks they were entitled to.

Job security was not necessarily guaranteed. Celia was finding it hard to return to her job as a security guard because “they can’t find me a building” to be posted at. While she had previously worked during the day and close to home, they were offering her faraway assignments at undesirable times—on the swing shift, 4:00 p.m. to midnight, or graveyard, midnight to 8:00 a.m. She turned these offers down because they were incompatible with raising a three-month-old child and because she feared driving so far without a license: “Now they are pressuring me, that if I don’t pick something soon, they are going to have to let me go.”

While the women I spoke to had accessed maternity leave, there are likely many undocumented women unable to fully claim their rights. Nancy Ortega’s employer pressured her to return soon after the birth of her second child because his business was suffering without her. She felt able to advocate for herself, but many may not. Speaking about her coworkers at a fast-food restaurant, who were mostly first-generation undocumented adults, Sol Montes shared,

When a few of my coworkers got pregnant, they asked for maternity leave and they almost got fired because of that. I admire those women because they’re hardcore women with this big ol’ belly working the whole kitchen, holding their pee. When they gave birth, like their milk dripping [because] they had to pump, and they don’t let them go pump because it’s so freakin’ busy.

Undocumented workers’ labor rights are routinely violated.<sup>8</sup> This can prevent mothers from taking time off before and after the birth, or caring for themselves and their children’s needs after birth. Financial strain can also dissuade undocumented parents from taking advantage of maternity or parental leave. Fear of retaliation may limit their willingness to claim accommodations.

“I WANTED TO RAISE MY CHILD A CERTAIN WAY”:  
CONSTRAINED PARENTING

The shared barriers associated with illegality crystalized when participants became parents. Pablo Ortiz, who had a three-year-old daughter, explained that

his undocumented status pushed him into work as a solicitor, earning a variable income of \$800–\$1,000 a month. Although his citizen partner worked, the birth of their daughter stressed their already-precarious finances: “Before, if I [only] ate a 99-cent burger from a fast-food restaurant, it wasn’t a problem for me. Before. But now, it has to be more than that because I have to be a father to my daughter and I have to provide for her as best as I can.”

Imagining the childhood he wanted to provide for his daughter, Pablo felt that he had fallen short. His low income, lack of a Social Security number, and absent credit history had previously forced them to live in a substandard apartment: “That place was very polluted. We have a video recording of that place when our baby was really little, and we see the sun[light] reflection going into our place and you could see all this dust.” They lived in a small back section of the house; a hallway had been closed off with drywall to separate it from the front half. Although the house was meticulously clean, it was small and cramped—belongings piled in the corners because it lacked storage space. His partners’ citizenship status and higher income could not relieve this barrier. “[It] was really hard to find [a new place] because a lot of the places that we were trying to move into, they wanted my Social Security [number] or they wanted my credit history and all that stuff, and I don’t have none of that stuff.” Having also recently looked for apartments in the neighborhood, I agreed; even the most rundown apartments had required official rental applications and were unwilling to overlook a lack of a Social Security number. Although most participants identified problems with their housing and living situations, parents were particularly concerned about how this affected their children—pollution, undermaintained facilities, much-needed pest control, limited space to play, poor schools, and dangerous neighborhoods. Now that Pablo’s daughter was older, these financial barriers became even more apparent. He longed to fulfill her desires for toys while also meeting his personal commitment to maximizing her educational opportunities.

Like Pablo, most parents were unsatisfied with what they could provide, prompting negative feelings about their parenting that could be traced directly to the financial barriers raised by their undocumented status. Most managed to meet their family’s basic needs, but they aspired to more. Like their citizen peers, they harbored intensive parenting ideals that pushed them to prioritize their children’s development and future upward mobility by spending time with them, raising them well, and providing for their educational success.<sup>9</sup> Gendered expectations shaped their specific commitments: women were expected to provide care, while men expected to provide financial stability and support. Those who could not meet these ideals often felt, and were seen by others, as “bad” parents because they could not meet these middle-class expectations. In all, hegemonic parenting ideals and constrained circumstances jointly shaded undocumented young adults’ parenting experiences.

*Falling Short: Raising Children in Line with Parenting Ideals*

Undocumented parents' limited employment options often left them feeling as if they could not parent in the way they would like. Elias Ruiz, the undocumented father of two sons, ages four and five, reflected:

I would love to find another job where it would be less hours and I have time . . . to dedicate more time to my sons. I am taking time to work 11- or 12-hour days. And when they go to school, I am at home, and when they come home, I am at work. And I can't enjoy the weekends. Only Sunday, because Saturdays also I have to work.<sup>10</sup>

He and his partner, Nancy Ortega, felt financially stable; he made \$2,000 a month working at a warehouse, and she made slightly less. But they both worked long hours, six days a week. Both longed for more family time, and Nancy worried that this was hurting their relationship with their sons. For a while, the kids preferred spending time with their grandmother. While parents like Nancy and Elias strove to meet their parenting ideals, their undocumented status constrained their parenting opportunities.

Multigenerational households were a common and effective strategy for maximizing the ability to meet basic needs on a limited income; this strategy, however, could frustrate parenting. In Yessica Martinez's case, our conversation about housing was prompted by her mom arriving home with her three-year-old son and eight-year-old brother. The small apartment erupted with commotion as the kids ran in, chasing each other and pulling out toys. When her son emerged from a bedroom in tears, she admitted wanting him to be able to enjoy his own space so that he was not constantly fighting with her brother.

Zoe Miranda reported more intense parenting problems: "I need to get help. I'm bad [at being a mother] because I have an anger problem. And when I get angry, I start yelling at him instead of communicating with him. . . . Not like really bad, like psycho. But I do yell. And I don't like yelling at him." She credited this to her strained relationship with her mother, whom they lived with, and their constant arguing: "I'm 29, and I still feel like she sees me like I'm 15." These frustrations led her anger to build quickly and continue a cycle of what she believed was dysfunctional parenting.

Many multigenerational living situations did not create conflict, but they could tax parent-child relationships and parental self-esteem. High childcare costs prompted parents to rely on family members. Yessica explained that this was a key reason she continued to live with her mother and was grateful for her help. Some, like Edgar Gonzalez, found it mutually beneficial to pay his mom to watch his five-year-old daughter. While confident that their children were well cared for, some worried about how their children were being raised. Sara Romero, however, was frustrated to have her ex-boyfriend's mother care for their son:

I know his grandma takes really good care of him, better than any day care will. But he's, like, really chiquiada [spoiled]. He's one year old, and he does not know how to drink from a straw. . . . No, sit him down and teach them. If you don't carry him when he wants to, he'll start crying and screaming.

Sara desperately wanted “more time off work and more time with him so I can raise him my own way. Right now she's raising him the way she raised his dad, and we're going to have a problem.” She feared that her son might turn out like her ex-boyfriend, lacking motivation, unable to keep a job, and disrespectful toward women. Finding an affordable and quality day care seemed to be the only way out, but it felt nearly impossible on the limited income she earned working nights at a bar.

Unable to rely on family members, other parents sought affordable childcare. Most relied on babysitters, often immigrant women who watched several children in their home without any accreditation or training. Nancy's two sons had a babysitter near their school. Although they had been mostly satisfied, they sometimes worried about the conditions. For example, when her youngest son was an infant, he came home covered in inexplicable insect bites, presumably because the babysitter lived in low-quality housing. With another babysitter, her eldest son, then around five, let slip that the babysitter's 20-something son was pushing them around and threatening them. While angry, she was stuck until they could find alternative childcare.

Some mothers found it more effective to stay home, forcing the household to sacrifice an additional income. Nayeli Valencia, the undocumented partner of a DACA recipient, explained,

Right now I am not looking for work because of the illegal state that I'm in. I am not going to find a job that pays me well. And so it doesn't make sense to go to a job where they pay me the minimum [wage], because I have two kids and I would have to pay for a babysitter for them. And if I make the minimum, it doesn't make sense. I am going to work only to pay the babysitter.<sup>11</sup>

Nayeli and several others elected to become stay-at-home mothers, particularly when their children were young. Highlighting how this was linked to her undocumented status, Nayeli aspired to be able to legally work so “we would not be buried economically.” She explicitly connected this to her ability to parent: “If we could have a little more for the kids to have enough clothes, because they're growing.”<sup>12</sup>

Low-income citizen parents share these concerns. Indeed, research suggests that one adult working full-time for minimum wage cannot earn enough to provide for a modest standard of living. In California, about 40 percent of one full-time, minimum-wage income is needed to pay for a four-year-old's childcare.<sup>13</sup> While there are government programs to increase the affordability of quality childcare for low-income families, undocumented parents struggle to access these

programs because of ineligibility, fear of interacting with social service institutions, or a desire to avoid being seen as a public charge, which could endanger future legalization options.<sup>14</sup>

Further exemplifying the unique aspects of undocumented status, Elisa Fernandez, the citizen partner of a recently legalized permanent resident, believed that their ability to meet parenting ideals depended on their legal status. Her husband's legalization had fostered financial stability, enabling them to move out of her in-laws' house and improving her sense of parenting:

One of the most frustrating things for me is that I wanted to raise my child a certain way, but when you are living at home with that many people, then everybody has some kind of input whether you like it or not. . . . I still take my son [there] 'cause my babysitter is my mother-in-law, and I appreciate her so much. But once we moved out, we, I feel like we felt a sense of power over our own immediate family.

While low-income citizens also face strong constraints on economic mobility, undocumented young adults must contend with legally imposed barriers. As Elisa suggests, documented status opens up the possibility of mobility and is seen by most undocumented parents (perhaps unrealistically in some cases) as a game changer that would allow them to parent in the way they would like.

*“Bad” Parents: Gendered Expectations and the Pressure to Provide*

Both mothers and fathers initially asserted that their immigration status did not affect their ability to be a good parent. Adán Olivera explained, “That is just a paper, and not [about] being a person.” Financial barriers, however, run up against gendered expectations, disrupting aspirations for a life in which status does not matter. Fathers feel pressure to consistently provide for their children's basic needs and wants, while mothers focus on caregiving, including meeting intermittent costs related to children's education, health, and personal growth. The different level of financial resources needed to meet these expectations continued the gendered consequences of illegality identified in chapter 3, consequences in which men have a higher risk of disrupted family formation. Still, both mothers and fathers risked feeling that they were, or were perceived to be, “bad” parents.

Most mothers felt that they were meeting gendered parenting expectations because they cared for and spent time with their children. Sylvia Cortez saw herself as a good mother to her toddler: “[I] take care of him, raise him as a good boy [to] be respectful with other people . . . be there for him when he is sick.” A single mother earning \$1,200 a month as an office assistant, Sylvia experienced many of the constraints discussed above, but she, like most mothers, felt that she was raising her son well despite these barriers and frustrations. They sought the best options within their means, spent their available time with their children, and nurtured them. Citing these caregiving activities, most felt that they were “good” mothers.

Yet immigration status and employment situations prevented a few women from meeting gendered expectations. Sara Romero recounted how her job prevented her from performing key caretaker responsibilities: “Sometimes my mom would be like, ‘You’re a bad mom because all you care about is work, and on your days off all you want to do is sleep.’” Sara struggled to meet mothering ideals because her undocumented status made her take the only stable job she could find: working nights at a bar, which entailed getting home at 3:30 a.m. As a result, she was unable to put her toddler son to bed and struggled to wake up with him in the middle of the night and early morning. Consistent with other studies on working mothers and transnational mothering,<sup>15</sup> Sara attempted to reimagine herself as a good mother by focusing on her ability to provide financially. As a single mother, working hard to make ends meet came at the expense of not meeting others’ expectations of how she should mother her son. Her parental self-esteem plunged.

Conversely, most fathers struggled to meet fathering expectations and felt negatively about their parenting. Pablo Ortiz shared, “Now I’m also a father, and therefore I’ve got to provide for my kid. Those stereotypes have affected me because I feel bad about myself. That I can’t provide for my kid.” In his second interview, he reflected on how he felt as a father as my research assistant rushed to drive him to the train station so he could begin his two-to-three-hour commute home from work:

*Pablo:* Immigration status takes [away] my right to be a full-time father. . . .

*Interviewer:* Do you feel like your immigration status affects your daughter and yourself?

*Pablo:* Oh yeah, how it affects me as a provider like—ahhh, I wish I could—’cause our car just broke down not too long ago. I wish I could just go to a dealer and say I wanna buy a car. So we could go and take my daughter to day care, so she could use it to go to school . . . so we could minimize the dangers from my daughter in the streets, riding the bus and all that stuff. As a father figure, I wish I could take my daughter to Legoland or SeaWorld or some of these places, you know? But sometimes I can’t, and I just try to turn the TV off for her [laughs].

Pablo anxiously longed to have the financial flexibility to provide his daughter with a safe, comfortable living situation. He also acknowledged the importance of spending quality time with his daughter—turning off the TV to limit her screen time—and doing activities together. But he lamented that his immigration status and precarious financial situation sometimes prevented him from even doing that

well. As his partner planned for an upcoming trip, he worried about “how to tell my daughter that maybe I won’t be able to go” because he could not miss work.

Ray Guzman explained that these negative self-conceptions are often reinforced by others’ gendered parenting expectations:

As a father, I feel worthless. . . . I’m 28, and when I go apply for something for my kids or [at their] school, they want to know what I’m doing [for work]. They look at me a lot different. They tell me, “Oh, well you’re not doing nothing. How do you provide for your family?” I do side jobs. And they say, “Well, you don’t have a stable income?” . . . I feel like I’m handicapped in some way.

Despite spending quality time with his children every day, Ray’s intermittent work as a handyman made him feel inadequate. These concerns are reflected in his belief that he was also an inadequate partner given that his children’s mother covered rent and bills. Although Ray’s circumstances were worse than most, many fathers felt similarly constrained and judged.

Adán Olivera was one of a few who felt he was a good father because “I take them places like Disneyland, to the park. I buy them anything that I didn’t have. . . . Every time we go out, we’ll just buy them something.” Adán internalized the paternal provider role and found that he could live up to expectations because he’d secured work as a salaried office employee earning \$2,400 a month, despite lacking a Social Security number. His was one of the highest reported incomes. He admitted that it would be significantly harder to be a “good” father if he had a minimum-wage job similar to those of his undocumented friends, “because it would not be providing me enough money.”

The intersection of gendered parenting expectations and economic limitations led to divergent consequences because mothers and fathers negotiated different levels of financial demand. Fathers focused on the relatively high costs of consistently providing for basic needs, while mothers emphasized lower costs that limited their caregiving. Luis Escobar and Aida Mendoza were both married to their citizen partners, living with their parents, and had infant children at the time. Despite being in similar situations, expectations differentiated how much they internalized negative feelings:

*Luis:* [I’m supposed to be] this male provider [who’s] strong. And the fact that we lost our place and now I’m [living] with my in-laws and it’s hard to find a great-paying job. And I have this uncertain future for myself. . . . It makes you feel guilty that you have a family and that you have a baby.

*Aida:* Just recently he got very sick. He needed a humidifier, and we had to look around with people that we knew to see who could lend it to us [because we could not afford one]. . . . It breaks my heart that I can’t do anything for him.

While Luis and Aida both reported negative consequences, they confronted different levels of financial need with distinctive frequency. Luis felt the pressure to consistently muster over \$1,000 a month to cover rent and bills, while Aida worried about a one-time, relatively small \$30 expense. Yet both parents conducted considerable emotional work as they felt guilty about the limitations that their immigration status placed on their children. Fathers, however, experienced these negative feelings almost daily in response to broader provider demands, while mothers noted isolated incidents related to caretaking.

The gendered nature of social service structures reinforces such differences. Undocumented parents are not eligible for welfare and other government support programs, such as the Earned Income Tax Credit, that many working parents depend on to make ends meet.<sup>16</sup> The social programs they are eligible for cater to mothers' caretaking, while there are few resources helping undocumented fathers (or single mothers) afford basic expenses like rent and bills.

Luis was the only father to discuss using social services to close financial gaps. When recently unemployed, he visited a local food pantry. He struggled with this decision and felt it reflected poorly on him as a father. Yet all mothers reported easily accessing California's Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program, which provides monthly healthy-food vouchers to low-income pregnant women, breastfeeding and postpartum mothers, and infants and children under age five. In 2016, WIC benefits provided an average \$61.24 worth of food to qualified family members each month.<sup>17</sup> Most participants enrolled simultaneously with their application for emergency Medi-Cal during pregnancy. Mothers embraced this and other social services, including Medi-Cal coverage for their citizen children. They interpreted it not as a maternal failing but a critical tool to help them provide for their children's health and well-being. As their children aged, mothers often identified low-cost, after-school activities to help them meet their goal of providing for their children's development and educational success.

Further highlighting the role of social service structures, single mothers reported that they struggled to file for child support. While they did not perceive accessing child support as a personal failing, many felt that they were choosing between increased financial security and the potential threat of deportation. Tanya Diaz recounted her interactions with her son's father:

He would give me money before, but it wasn't consistent. I've avoided going to court . . . because I don't know how that will affect [me]. He could get mad and be like, "Well, she's not even a citizen here." And I don't know how that would play out in court. But it's that fear that you don't know. . . . I think it's because he knows I can't do anything about it. . . . My son's dad would try to scare me before when I was younger. He'd be like, "I'm taking you to court, and I'm gonna keep my son anyways because you're gonna get deported" and things like that.

For years, Tanya struggled to assert her right to child support out of fear that her ex-partner would file for full custody. Although she knew she had a right to child support, she refused to demand it to minimize conflict and reduce her risk of deportation.

Sara Romero was planning a similar tactic until she reached someone at the child support office who informed her that her status does not matter. She explained, “It did stop me at first, because when you call the child support offices, the first thing they ask you for is ‘OK, what’s your Social Security number?’ And you’re like, ‘Really? Great.’ But they told me you don’t have to worry because it’s not going for you, it’s going for him [my son].” Armed with this information, she felt safe enough to demand that her son’s father meet his financial responsibilities. Their examples show that undocumented status can dissuade parents from accessing social services that can help them meet children’s needs, particularly if they are not embedded in a system designed to serve undocumented immigrants. Notably, these social services are still primarily set up to meet mothers’ needs, further contributing to gendered consequences.

#### CONDITIONAL IMPROVEMENTS: FAMILIAL FINANCIAL STABILITY THROUGH DACA

Obtaining DACA removed immediate barriers to undocumented young adults’ socioeconomic mobility by providing employment authorization. These gave undocumented parents an increased sense of financial security and flexibility, facilitating their transition into and positive feelings about parenthood. This change, however, was not available to all parents; it depended on their being able to use DACA’s work permit to gain a higher-paying job and a secure pathway to upward mobility.

#### *“That Changed a Lot about How I Felt”: Financial Stability and Flexibility*

Receiving DACA enabled undocumented young adults, particularly men, to feel more confident about becoming parents. Enrique Escobar, who had delayed having children because of his undocumented status, recounted the pressures: “From my family, since all my brothers, pretty much they all have kids. They’re like, ‘When are you having kids? You’re getting old already. Her family, I think it’s probably about the same thing. They’ll even come to us and ask.” These questions have prompted him and his fiancée to think about when they would have children. He explained, “Before I didn’t even want to have kids.” He credited this change to obtaining DACA: “Just being able to—or having that confidence and being able to support and . . . take care of a family. That changed a lot about how I felt.”

For those who were already parents, DACA opened up slightly better employment opportunities and provided the financial flexibility they needed to more easily cover their children's expenses and meet parenting ideals. Zoe Miranda, who moved from a customer service job at a gas station to one at a major department store, reflected on her newfound ability to provide for her three-year-old son:

I was able to buy him the clothes that he needed. 'Cause we were struggling financially. . . . So I was able to get him his shoes because he didn't have shoes. I was able to get him pants, shirts, sweaters, everything that he needed. Toys that he would go to the store and tell me, "Mommy, I want this." And I'm like, "No, papas, I don't have money right now." I was finally able to be like, "Get it. It's OK."

Her slight increase in disposable income made taking her son to the store significantly more enjoyable. "It just felt so good" because she was finally able to give him the things that he needed *and* wanted. This also made her feel better about herself as a mother: "People are not looking at me. Like, 'Oh my god! She can't get him that?'" Now the cashiers aren't rolling their eyes, other customers aren't judging her with side-eyed glances, and her son is happily feeling provided for.

Receiving DACA also allowed undocumented young adults to achieve some additional financial flexibility by getting a credit card. Despite receiving DACA relatively early on, in October 2012, almost two years before his second interview, Adán Olivera kept the same office job and reported earning \$100 more than during his previous interview. Despite few changes, he believed that DACA had improved his economic situation: "It's better. Before, we didn't have a backup with the credit card. Now we have a backup. If we need something, we have this credit card." Although credit cards are a risky way to make ends meet, it allowed him to manage his family's larger expenses: "We can buy the kids more stuff. Before, it used to be paycheck by paycheck. It's not enough. But now with the credit cards we would pay this." Pausing, he continued, "Kind of like Christmas. For Christmas, we'll get a credit card, and we're gonna spend \$1,500. That's it. And then we'll pay it off. And before, those \$1,500, we didn't have it, 'cause it was just the paycheck." This unanticipated benefit of DACA allowed Adán and his wife to feel like better parents and access some of the financial management strategies that citizen parents could.

Along these lines, DACA also enabled parents to access improved housing. Julián Salinas, his wife, and their two children shared one bedroom in an apartment that they rented with his mom and uncle. Describing it as "a little crowded for us," he recalled how they had been unable to find another place when both he and his partner were undocumented: "We'd tell the manager we don't have papers, [but] we could give you references, we have bank accounts, we can do this, and they were like, 'No, you're not [legal]. You can't do that.'" Now, with Social Security numbers and California IDs, they could follow the official rental

application process. Currently looking for apartments, Julián shared, “I have more freedom to choose wherever we want to live. . . . Before we had to go to the Latino neighborhoods [because] . . . they are more open to negotiate.” Although they had yet to move, Julián already felt a sense of freedom and possibility, which he directly attributed to DACA. This translated into feeling like a better parent because he and his partner desperately want to move their children into a better neighborhood with more space. His partner mentioned wanting them to have a yard so that their kids could play outside whenever they wanted. Once they began looking at places, his daughter excitedly asked, “Oh, can I have a pet? Can I have a dog? Can I have my own room? When we move out, can I have my own room?” They both looked forward to being able to provide their children with these experiences.

Though receiving DACA enabled parents to develop discretionary income and financial flexibility, it also brought new fears and risks of spoiling children. Adán Olivera credited DACA with allowing him to provide his children with small luxuries that he did not have growing up. He now takes his children out on activities every weekend:

I do it because I didn't have any of that. My parents couldn't afford none of that stuff that they [my kids] have. . . . I talk to my kids. I tell them why they have this—“You have a PS3 [video game console], you can have a little car which you play with every day.” And they kind of understand where I'm coming from. Like, I didn't have this, but I want you to have it. But . . . you gotta be good in your grades, you behave, everything. Be respectful, and, as of now, it's been really good with them.

He boasted that this has been an effective parenting strategy. In a recent parent-teacher conference, his seven-year-old son's teacher told him, “He's good, always participating. He's really good to have in the class, and he's always helping other kids.” His nine-year-old daughter is “always helping [her teacher], passing papers and doing her homework, everything.” Like Adán, many parents measured their success by being able to disrupt the financial limitations that they experienced as the children of undocumented parents.

*“It Takes Time”: Persisting Barriers to Family Mobility*

Not all parents could capitalize on DACA to change jobs and improve their socioeconomic status. Some recipients did not see substantial changes in their employment situations. As she cradled her two-month-old daughter, Maria Loya explained that her ability to provide had not changed. She kept the same job working as a floor manager at a fast-food restaurant: “Right now it's kind of hard to find a job. So like, when I see that there's more job opportunities, then I would probably try to apply to a better-paying job.” Like Maria, others mentioned a slow economy and limited job opportunities as reasons why they had been unable to improve their financial situation. This was most common among

parents who did not have college degrees or strong social networks to help them gain access to better jobs.

A handful of parents thought about or had returned to school for additional certifications or degrees to improve their chances for finding a better job, but they struggled to balance this with family life. Nancy Ortega, who continued working in the same office after having DACA for almost two years, explained that she was trying to finish 150 hours of training to become a licensed insurance provider so she could open up her own business. Although she thought it would take her only a few weeks to complete the hours via an online course, it had been over six months:

It's just lacking time that I work [on it]. At work, I was only able to do it for about 10 to 15 minutes. So even though I tried, it was kinda hard for me to do it at work and then come home and do it, take care of the kids, and the homework and our whole routines. I would do it for another 10 to 15 minutes. And 30 minutes a day, you know, for a hundred and something hours, it doesn't—it takes time.

Similarly, Celia Alvarez returned to community college, but her husband commented that it was difficult, "Trying to match it [her school] with our daughter's schedule. . . . Both of us trying to be good parents and trying to be there as much as we can . . . she's held down by us [me and our daughter]."

In several cases, the passage of time hampered pursuits of economic mobility. Undocumented young adults had been in the same job for years; they were older and did not have the employment history, professional skills, or certifications needed to move into more lucrative employment. As Nancy and Celia noted, they had taken on additional responsibilities, building a home with their partners and raising their children. They had both struggled to balance work and community college in their late teens and early 20s. This juggling act was significantly harder now that they had family commitments.

Finally, obtaining DACA did not remove the threat that parents may once again be plunged into instability. Erick Godinez and I discussed his attempts to save money now that he received DACA and was earning more at his job with a moving company. When I asked if he was saving for something specific, his face lit up: "My girlfriend is pregnant!" He continued, "I'm saving for the baby. Yeah, she is four months [pregnant] right now. We found out it was a baby girl, so we're so happy!" Caught up in his excitement, I shared that I was also four months pregnant. Following our excited laughter, congratulations, and baby shower discussions, the conversation naturally paused. His face suddenly dropped as he quietly added, "That is one of the things I'm afraid of."

They give us DACA for two years. I know that I can renew it, right? I'm afraid when Obama leaves, what's going to happen? That's a big question mark for me. I'm not afraid, but what's going to happen? But I tell my girlfriend . . . it's too much people to cancel the thing, so I think they are just going to renew it every two years. So, it's one of my worries.

Erick's past fears about being unable to provide transformed into worries about the future, framing his feelings about becoming a father. His hypothetical foreshadowed immigration policy changes to come with the rescission of DACA a few years later under President Donald Trump.

### CONCLUSION

As we wrapped up our second interview, Luis returned to the same question: Was his immigration status affecting his parenting? He was still struggling with the idea that spending time with his children was just as important as financially providing for their future well-being. Receiving DACA had allowed him to obtain a new job at a nonprofit. This dramatically improved his ability to provide financially, but it required long hours as he tried to make up for lost years without a professional career. He had little time for his family. Comparing himself to a younger nephew who had become a permanent resident and bought a house, Luis lamented that he had been unable to use his college degree or work permit to achieve such mobility. He wondered if perhaps it was not his generation's turn. Maybe he was meant to slave away like his parents so that his daughters could do better.

Uncertainty, financial instability, and persistent worry shaped Luis's and other undocumented young adults' decisions to have children, their parenting experiences, and their parental self-esteem. They struggled to live up to ideal visions of parenting but still hoped that their children's citizenship status would protect them from the worst consequences. Instead, they began to see multigenerational punishment as their undocumented status molded their children's everyday lives and opportunities.