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## Snapped into Focus: Addressing the Challenges Faced by Undocumented Mexican Immigrants in the United States

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**Snapped into Focus:  
Addressing the  
Challenges Faced by  
Undocumented Mexican  
Immigrants in the United  
States**

Written by Nora Peterson with the  
collaboration of Jennifer Carrillo



**Image 1:** Jennifer Carrillo was born in Mexico City, Mexico. This region has a relatively low immigration rate compared to other regions in Mexico, but there has been a dramatic increase in crime rate and unemployment since the implementation of NAFTA in 1994 (Consejo Nacional de Población 2010).

## Introduction

It is estimated that as of 2010 there are 11.4 million Mexican immigrants living in the United States. This figure represents 30% of the total immigrant population and 62% of the undocumented immigrant population (Ortmeyer and Quinn 2012). Jennifer Carrillo, a resident of the Bloomington-Normal, Illinois community, has represented both sets of statistics throughout the thirteen years that she has resided in the United States. Born in Mexico City, Mexico (see Image 1), Jenn and her family immigrated to the United States on a six-month tourist visa when she was 10 years old. Without receiving any news regarding their application for residency, her parents decided to remain in the U.S. as undocumented immigrants after their tourist visa expired—a decision that would dramatically impact the family members' lives. Without a Social Security number, Jenn was forced to live on the margins of

society as an adolescent. She was unable to apply for a job, a driver's license, or the proper paperwork to attend college. Despite the fact that Jenn exhibits the characteristics that American culture promotes for its own youth—determination, intellectual curiosity, integrity—she was forced into a dead end simply because of a decision her parents made on her behalf when she was a child.

Now 23, Jenn has lived the majority of her life in the U.S. and has successfully applied for legal residency, an opportunity made possible because she fell in love with and married an American citizen. As a documented member of society, Jenn has successfully graduated from college and now works as a community organizer at Illinois People's Action, a community organization whose mission is to organize for justice in local communities, as a community organizer. Much of her work focuses on the organization's immigrant rights campaign, addressing the obstacles faced by immigrants in the U.S.

This essay will address many of the same issues that Jenn addresses in her activism work, focusing specifically on: the unfair immigration process and subsequent consequences for those who are unable to become legal residents of the United States, and the moral responsibility felt by immigrants who have successfully navigated the immigration process to actively try to improve the status of undocumented immigrants in the United States.

## Assumptions and Early Hypothesis

Prior to conducting any research, I had limited knowledge regarding immigration legislation in this country. Coming from a university town, I had many friends whose families had immigrated to the U.S. and I was aware that there were different levels of legal status, such as: citizens, legal residents, and Green Card holders. I was not well versed, however, in the qualifications necessary to obtain these different levels and in the differences that each status implied. I became more familiar with the concept of undocumented immigration when I became involved with the Spanish Honors Society on my campus, Sigma Delta Pi, and helped organize a community workshop focused on advocating the DREAM (Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors) Act legislation. It is through this organization that I initially met Jenn, who was inducted as an honorary member at the initiation ceremony I attended. At this occasion, she spoke about her experiences as an undocumented immigrant and her current work with the community organization, Illinois People's Action.

From this initial encounter, I was aware of some of the details of Jenn's

immigration story. I used this basic knowledge to guide my initial research, focusing mostly on literature pertaining to the experiences of undocumented immigration, a topic with which I was not very familiar. The majority of such research focuses on the phenomenon of crossing the Mexico-America border illegally, often focusing specially on the use of *coyotes*—people who smuggle immigrants across the border for a fee—in order to enter the U.S. This method of immigration is commonly used in the mainstream media to portray Mexican immigrants in a negative light.

Many of the articles that I consulted while conducting preliminary research focused on the specific techniques involved in this form of immigration and on the dangers associated with physically crossing the border. These dangers were examined in depth in the research of both Christian Zlotniski and Lynn Stephen, who each address the rationalities behind choosing to take such dangerous risks and the impact of these decisions on immigrants' lives once they are in America. There was little information concerning immigrants who came into America on a legal visa but who remained in the country past their visa's expiration date, which is how Jenn's family became undocumented. I suspect that this method of becoming undocumented is less prevalent in research because it is both more difficult to study—through the mere fact that, by definition, they are living on the margins of society—and it is more politically charged as it reflects more poorly on the quality of the American immigration system.

Prior to this project I was aware of the concept of the seasonal cycle of immigration for Mexican workers. According to this concept, Mexican workers, who are usually male, come to

America in order to work in the border states during harvest season or other times during the year when there is an extra need for labor. Many of my sources, including the research conducted by David L. Ortmeyer and Michael A. Quinn, indicate that the cycle of immigration has been changing in response to both the modifications in immigration policy established by the United States and to the economic hardships that have developed in Latin American countries since the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994.

As immigration policies become more restricted, it becomes more physically dangerous to cross the Mexico-America border. Therefore, the monetary value for a safe passage across the border also increases. This phenomenon allows *coyotes* to charge the immigrant-hopefuls inflated rates, which increases their debt and, therefore, prolongs the amount of time that they have to stay in America in order to pay off all their debt. While current research recognizes that poor economic circumstances in native countries is the major factor in deciding to immigrate, as was the case for Jenn's family, there still seems to be a disconnect between the concept of why immigrants would choose to come to America as undocumented immigrants. Again, the research does not seem to take into account those who wish to immigrate permanently, such as Jenn's family, but who simply are not supported by the system in place.

My familiarity with the DREAM Act and the knowledge that Jenn would have been affected by the lack of legislation in place for children of undocumented immigrants influenced me to perform further research on the topic. Since I knew that Jenn had attended college, I had expected the

DREAM Act to be a prevalent theme throughout the interview. I was surprised, however, to learn that while the legislature involved with the DREAM Act is obviously integral to its success, both Jenn and the current research are more focused on the actual activism of the undocumented immigrants themselves. There are many texts, such as those written by both Laura Corruncker and William Perez, that explore the importance of undocumented youth taking a stand and challenging the status quo for themselves.

## Ethnographic Methods

Jenn and I conducted our first interview at Kelly's, a local café in Bloomington, Illinois, over her lunch break. It was during this first interview that Jenn told me her entire life story—we ended up talking for close to two hours straight. As I was already familiar with parts of her story from the Sigma Delta Pi initiation ceremony, I had been able to come to this interview with some preliminary research completed. To help me better understand the political perspective that was integral to her story, Jenn also recommended some literature to me, including the book, *Harvest of Empire*. As I continued to research, Jenn and I kept in contact through telephone and email exchanges, during which I could ask her to clarify a point or to double-check a fact from her story.

I had requested that she bring her laptop with her to this first meeting so she could show me visual components of her stories. The photographs that she chose to share with me focused mainly on her activism work with Illinois People's Action, which would become a major theme of our work together. During the first interview we had also discussed ideas for the images that

we would like to include in this photo essay, which would highlight the main points of this essay: the problems with the current immigration process and the activism associated with changing this process. Her work with Illinois People's Action, which includes communicating with people and organizing events as well as actively participating in protests and demonstrations, epitomizes this activism. Unfortunately, there were no demonstrations scheduled during our research time so I was unable to attend any, but Jenn supplied me with a few images from her personal archives that captured the spirit of such demonstrations.

I was able to visit her office, where we took a few pictures and she was able to explain the purpose of Illinois People's Action more thoroughly. I was also able to meet many of her co-workers at a fundraising event organized by the Latinos Unidos por el Cambio campaign, a branch project of Illinois People's Action, for the Bloomington-Normal community (see Image 2). The fundraiser was a lively event featuring a DJ, live music, and authentic food and it seemed to draw a large crowd. It was at this event that I was able to observe the sense of community that this organization thrives on.



**Image 2:** Jenn (center) with her Illinois People's Action co-workers at the Family Fundraiser Night for the Latinos Unidos por el Cambio ("Latinos United for Change") campaign.

Jenn and I also took many of our images at her home. Since we were in her private space we were able to utilize props and various backdrops in order to create more symbolic images, in contrast to the more straightforward images that we had taken at previous occasions. It was during my visit to her home that I was able to meet her husband, who played an integral role in Jenn's ability to pursue legal residency and in her current work with Illinois People's Action. While at her home, Jenn also shared her immigration documentation with me, including the very first tourist visa with the mandatory date of exit and the current paperwork that she is filing in order to become an American citizen (see Image 3).



**Image 3:** Jenn (right) shows me her immigration documentation, including the original six-month tourist visa that her family used when they first arrived in the United States on July 1, 2000. The expiration date for the visa is December 30, 2000—"The date that changed it all."

## Presentation of Data

Jenn was born in Mexico City, Mexico, in 1990, where she lived until she was 10 years old. Even as a child Jenn was aware of the poverty and danger that was becoming prevalent in her native country. As a seven year old, she recalls seeing other seven year olds who were homeless and wondering, “Why them? Why don’t they have homes and parents to take care of them like I do?” Jenn was witnessing the widespread effects of America’s newly implemented neoliberal economic strategy. This strategy, which sought sources of cheap labor in order to maximize profits, had detrimental effects on the economies of many Latin American countries, especially that of its neighbor, Mexico.

After the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994, there was a massive influx of foreign investors into Mexico, ultimately driving many local Mexican manufacturers out of business. As the profits from the *maquilas*—the American-run factories—were being maximized by American businesses, the gap between the wealthy and the poor continued to grow in Mexico. Without supplying any aid for combatting the increasing rate of unemployment, the instances of violence and drug trafficking escalated throughout Mexico, most notably around the border cities where the *maquilas* were highly concentrated.

This worsening of conditions led to a increase in migration to the United States, with the number of Mexican immigrants more than quadrupling from 621,218 people from 1970 to 1979, to 2,757,418 people from 1990 to 1999 (González 2000). It was during this latter period that Jenn’s family

fell victim to these circumstances. Her father, who had held a respectable job as a salesman, eventually lost his job and, after being robbed on the street of his life-savings, he decided it was no longer safe for his family to remain in Mexico.

Jenn’s parents decided to move the family to Chicago, Illinois, where her grandparents were currently residing. As Jenn’s family prepared to leave Mexico, her grandparents filed the paperwork to bring their family over legally. From the beginning, her family had every intention of becoming American citizens. Jenn and her family arrived in America on July 1, 2000, on a six-month tourist visa, destined to expire on December 30, 2000. Determined to make a new life for themselves, Jenn, her parents, and her younger sister moved in with her grandparents into a studio apartment in Chicago. Despite the crowded space, Jenn recalls loving her first few days in America—visiting Navy Pier, going to the movies, and enjoying the time with her family. It did not take long for her father to find a job with a little help from the Mexican immigrant community in Chicago, which is a community that contains a high concentration of undocumented immigrants. With this extensive support system, her family was able to settle in to their life in America with relative ease.

When the school year started, Jenn was enrolled as an English as a Second Language (ESL) student. She soon realized, however, that she did not fit the standard mold of ESL students, which seemed to be students who exhibit behavioral problems. Her teachers took note of her intellectual ability and, despite the fact that her English was not yet proficient, moved Jenn to the regular fifth grade classroom after spending only two days in the ESL classroom. She recalls that it was a difficult process to

adjust to the cultural expectations of the American classroom. Jenn has a vivid memory of giving her fifth grade teacher a hug and kiss goodbye—as is expected in a Mexican classroom—at the end of the day, much to the discomfort of her peers and her teacher. She continued to excel academically, however, and adapted relatively quickly to her new life in America.

December 30, 2000, the last day on Jenn's family's visa, came and went without any further progress concerning her family's application for residency. It was at this point that her parents made the fateful decision to stay in the U.S. as undocumented immigrants. They still had hope that their paperwork would eventually be processed and that they would become legal residents of the United States.

September 11, 2001 changed the lives of every single person living in America, including those of Jenn and her family. The backlash against all foreigners and immigrants was harsh and relentless. It became more and more difficult for immigrants to find and to keep jobs and for those without Social Security numbers, it became practically impossible to find a job. Before September 11<sup>th</sup>, there had been special Social Security numbers that immigrants could be assigned in order to complete basic tasks, such as opening bank accounts. Jenn's parents had requested two such numbers for themselves but had not done so on their daughters' behalves; they had still believed that their paperwork would be approved and that their daughters would not need these temporary Social Security numbers. After September 11<sup>th</sup>, however, these temporary Social Security numbers were no longer available and Jenn and her sister were left without the piece of identification that is crucial for succeeding



**Image 2:** "A lot of time that's what it feels like to be undocumented—*isolated and alone.*"

in America. They were not able to apply for such basic things as jobs or driver's licenses or even college.

Jenn was always aware of her undocumented status. She was aware of the fact that it was because of her undocumented status that she was restricted from participating in some activities, such as not being allowed to join her peers in the Chicago Children's Choir on their trip to South Africa because she could not apply for a passport. She was also aware that her legal status was not something to be discussed—it was a secret. Nonetheless, she had always been a motivated student who had excelled in academics, even skipping seventh grade just a few years after first arriving in America. She was attending one of the best high schools in the country. Her parents had always believed that education was of the utmost importance and even back in Mexico when it was not financially advisable to send their children to private schools they had found a way to do so.

It was not until later in high school that Jenn realized how detrimental her undocumented status was to her future goals. As often happens with children who have grown up in America as undocumented immigrants, Jenn's motivation to perform



well in school plummeted. Without a Social Security number, she knew that she would be unable to complete the proper paperwork in order to attend college—the best she could hope for was community college. Jenn did in fact graduate from high school and attend community college but she recalls “blowing off the SATs” and becoming more involved with the party scene. She remembers feeling betrayed by the unfairness of the situation and by her parents’ encouragement to reach for the stars when she was simply not in a position to reach them (see Image 4).

It was during this low period in her life that Jenn met her future husband. It was after they married that they realized that Jenn was now able to apply for legal residency and eventually American citizenship. She would now be able to receive a Social Security number, which would enable her to pursue her dream of higher education. After a lengthy and difficult process, Jenn became a legal resident and was admitted into Illinois State University. She recalls feeling as if she had

been granted a fresh start; her passion for education was rekindled and she flourished in her new life as a university student.

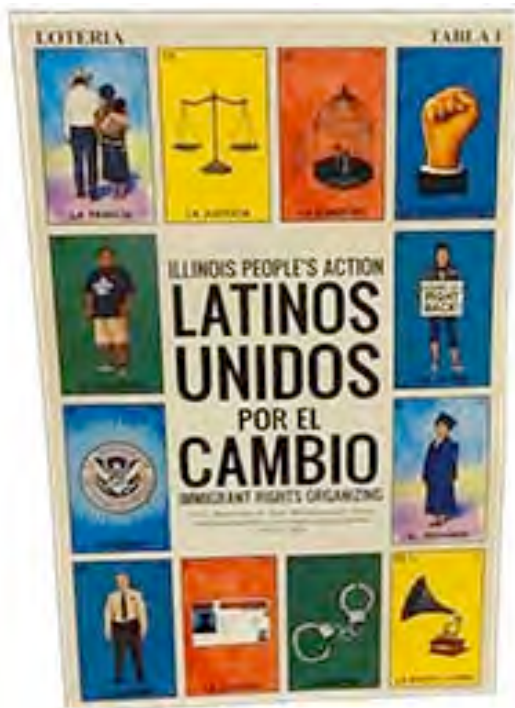
In the spring of 2010 Jenn’s world was once again turned upside down. On April 23, 2010, the Support Our Law Enforcement and Safe Neighborhoods Act—commonly known as Arizona Senate Bill 1070—was signed into law. This law required immigrants to carry registration documentation on them at all times and allowed law enforcement officers to demand proof of residency at any time. Jenn was infuriated by the audacity of this law, pointing out that this law was basically actively encouraging racial profiling. She believes that this law was an effort to target and deport undocumented Mexican immigrants specifically, saying that this law would not serve as a threat to “undocumented Canadian immigrants”, for example. Jenn recalls that it felt like something “snapped” inside of her—she knew that she had to fight this injustice in any way she could. Unfamiliar with the process of organizing large groups of



**Image 3:** Jenn actively participating with the crowd at the Immigration Reformation Rally in 2010. This was the first of many demonstrations that she would help organize and marks the beginning of her collaboration with Illinois People’s Action. \*Images for collage supplied from Jenn’s personal archives.

people, she used social media tools, including Facebook and Twitter, to rally students on Illinois State University's campus to protest against this law (see Image 5). She was pleasantly surprised to see such a large turnout of students and community members who shared her outrage. It was through organizing this demonstration that Jenn began her involvement with Illinois People's Action, who reached out to Jenn to help provide transportation and publicity for the demonstration. The leaders of the organization took notice of her skills as a leader and of her dedication and she soon became an integral part of the team.

Since graduating from Illinois State University, Jenn has been working full time for Illinois People's Action as a community organizer. Her main focus has been on their immigrant rights campaign, *Latinos Unidos por el Cambio*, developing local leaders for



**Image 4:** This advertisement for the Illinois People's Action *Latinos Unidos por el Cambio* ("Latinos United for Change") campaign addresses many of the community's key concerns, including justice, family, and the law. Jenn's animated avatar (second box down from the top right) promotes the idea that youth can make a difference.

the movement, developing and implementing strategies to address the justice issues, and organizing rallies, events, and demonstrations (see Image 6). The hours are long and the work is hard, but Jenn feels it would be "morally irresponsible" if she did not do all she could for these people. After all, her family members are still living as undocumented immigrants today. Each day when she goes into work she feels like she is fighting for the rights and opportunities of her own loved ones.

## Data Analysis

Jenn's experiences as an undocumented youth resemble those of the other undocumented youths in the United States in many ways. Having come to the country as a child, Jenn did not make the decision to become undocumented. Her parents, while it was not their desire to become undocumented members of society, did have the ability to decide what course of action would be best for their family. It is common for undocumented youth, who might be dedicated and passionate students like Jenn, to reach a mental impasse once they realize that their futures are significantly limited. For many, this impasse can be debilitating and often leads to unproductive activities: drinking, drugs, violence etc. (Corruncker 2012). Because these adolescents are outside the bounds of society—as is the nature of being "undocumented—many do not receive the support that they need in order to become productive members of society. What happens to these children who grow up in the United States alongside their American peers but, because they lack Social Security numbers, are discarded by the society in which they were raised? They become stuck in a limbo period, in which they are unable

to become recognized adults in their society, because they are unable to earn the marks associated with adulthood in American culture (i.e. job, college, car, etc.).

These children who grow up in the U.S. as undocumented youth also face a serious issue in terms of identity. Many such immigrants consider themselves “fully American”. After all, they grew up alongside their American peers, eating the same food and playing the same games. Unlike their American peers, however, undocumented youth will never be fully integrated into the American culture; they will always be on the margins of society. It is because of this exclusion they experience in the U.S. and the fact that they many do not have strong memories of their native country, that it is often difficult for



**Image 7:** Jenn represents the dual aspects of her personality and her struggle to maintain her identity as both a Mexican and an American. In the background of the image there is a painting by Frida Kahlo, one of the most celebrated Mexican artists, which represents her own struggle with her dual identity.

undocumented youth to choose the country to which they owe their allegiance. Jenn recalls having an epiphany moment at the age of 20, when she realized that she had lived exactly half of her life in America and half of her life in Mexico.

Now, at 23, Jenn has lived the majority of her life in America and she still struggles with the complexities of what her identity means, especially now that she is a legal resident of the United States while her family members remain undocumented (see Image 7). Because of her legal status, Jenn is set apart from her family members. She does not have to live in fear of being deported, for example, or of having her secret exposed. While this change has provided Jenn much relief in terms of daily stress, it has caused stress in the way that she relates to her family members. Jenn does believe that her work with Illinois People’s Action has helped her find a sense of resolution in terms of her role as a legal resident. With this organization, she is able to work passionately for a cause that has immense personal significance for her (see Image 8).



**Image 8:** “Every day I go into work I feel like I am fighting for my family.” Jenn works long hours both at her desk at the Illinois People’s Action office and on the go mobilizing demonstrations and events.

This call to activism is becoming a defining feature among immigration movements and the Student Immigration Movement in particular. While it is obvious that the legislation is working against immigrants, it is becoming more essential to the movement for the immigrants themselves to take a stand against such detrimental legislation as SB 1070 and in favor of such legislation as the DREAM Act. For many immigrants, taking such a public stand means exposing their undocumented status and risking deportation (Corrunker 2012). Jenn exemplifies this spirit of activism (see Image 9). A central role in Jenn's work with Illinois People's Action is to develop community leaders through providing them with training, skills required for organization, empowerment, and the motivation to take action. The idea behind this grassroots style of organization is that as the movement for immigration justice becomes more controlled by those most affected by the issues, the movement will continue to become more empowered.

This increase in empowerment is essential for the undocumented community who has been so marginalized. For Jenn, this issue is especially evident in the way that immigrants have been commoditized. For so many people, including her parents, the reason to immigrate to the United States is not a matter of desire—it is out of necessity. American business interests have pillaged the economies of Latin American countries and left them without the resources to fix the damage. This process initially began with the outsourcing of labor to these countries in order to maximize profits, but it soon became obvious that the people themselves could be used commodities. Currently there is an entire market reaping the benefits of persecuting undocumented immigrants, including those businesses involved with

running the private prison systems, those businesses financially supporting government officials in pushing for pro-deportation laws, and the list goes on (González 2011). For Jenn, it is unfathomable how common it has become to assign a monetary value to a human life. These are not commodities—they are people.



**Image 9:** Jenn participating in a demonstration during the Occupy BloNo Movement on October 15, 2011. *"It is hard not to fight... it would be morally irresponsible not to."* \*Image provided from Jenn's personal archives

## Conclusions

Jenn's family has still not heard back from the United States government regarding their application for residency that they filed over 10 years ago. They continue to live on the margins of society, as those who are undocumented are forced to do. Jenn is currently in the process of applying for full citizenship and while she embraces her status as an "American", she still considers Mexico to be her home. She believes that if she were able to go back and visit her childhood home with an adult perspective, she would feel a sense of resolution. While Jenn has the legal ability

to return to Mexico freely as she wishes, her family does not have that ability and she feels that it would be wrong to return to her native country while her family members could not. She continues to hope that one day she will be able to return to Mexico with her parents and sister and to visit the place of her youth once again.

There are still many questions that have been left unanswered, including the most important question of all—how does this issue get resolved? It will be interesting to observe how American citizens' views of Mexican immigrants are affected by the increasing presence of globalization and economic turmoil. As an American citizen, I have never personally been faced with such seemingly insurmountable challenges in order to obtain my basic rights to education. I am unfamiliar with this pressure and I will never be able to fully relate. Jenn and I hope to shed light on the injustices faced by undocumented immigrants both in the process of immigrating and in the subsequent consequences once they have arrived in the United States and to demonstrate that it is up to each individual to make a difference. We hope that through this essay the call to action is heard. As Jenn put it when she was snapped into action and began organizing the Immigration Reform Rally, "We have the bus, just get on!"

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