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## **White & Undocumented: The Undocumented Experience of Eastern European Dreamers**

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WHITE & UNDOCUMENTED

The Undocumented Experience of Eastern European Dreamers

A Thesis Presented to  
the Faculty of the University Honors Program  
Northeastern Illinois University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
of the NEIU Honors Program  
for Graduation with Honors





Natalia Borowska  
May 2021

HONORS SENIOR PROJECT  
ACCEPTANCE AND APPROVAL FORM

Natalia Borowska

White & Undocumented: The Undocumented Experience of Eastern European Dreamers

This thesis has been reviewed by the faculty of the NEIU Honors Program and is found to be in good order in content, style, and mechanical accuracy. It is accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the NEIU Honors Program and graduation with honors.

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## ABSTRACT

Undocumented immigration has been an increasingly popular topic of conversation in both politics and academia over the past several decades. Studies have shown that undocumented immigrants deal with an array of distinctive difficulties as a result of their lack of legal status. The objectives of this research are to obtain a better understanding of the white undocumented experience through testimonials of young Eastern European immigrants and assessing what role white privilege plays in these experiences. This research is a steppingstone for academic work on undocumented immigration, as very few studies acknowledge the presence of white undocumented immigrants in the United States, or work on understanding their experiences and how they differentiate from the Latinx experience. It is imperative that we conduct more research on Dreamers, as this subgroup of undocumented people were raised and spent the majority of their lives in the United States and therefore have a much different story from those who came to the country as adults. It is also critical that we speak more about non-Latinx undocumented communities in order for us to understand the issue of undocumentedness holistically. This study brings the white undocumented experience to light by interviewing four undocumented immigrants from Eastern Europe for their testimonials on living in the United States without legal status. These testimonials are compared to previous research that has been done on the Latinx undocumented experience. From this research, it is now evident that Eastern European undocumented migrants *do* have an advantage in not being targeted and criminalized for their status, particularly due to their skin color and ethnicity; in the United States, undocumented immigration is solely affiliated with the Latinx population.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
TABLE OF CONTENTS	v
INTRODUCTION	1
LITERATURE REVIEW	2
METHODOLOGY	10
RESULTS	12
CONCLUSION	22
BIBLIOGRAPHY	25

## INTRODUCTION

Undocumented immigration has been a major topic of discussion in American politics for several years now, with every new administration promising to address the issue in a different way. Over the past several decades, the United States has been very inconsistent with their immigration policies and attitudes, leaving undocumented folks constantly in limbo with where they stand with their immigration status. There are approximately 11 million undocumented immigrants living in the United States today, with just over 636,000 having DACA status (Batalova, 2021; Migration Policy Institute, 2020). Whenever undocumented immigration is being discussed in media and politics, the conversation tends to strictly focus on the Latinx community. While it is true that a large portion of the undocumented population in this country is Latinx, approximately  $\frac{1}{4}$  is not (Rosenblum & Ruiz, 2015). Despite other ethnicities being part of the undocumented community, it is the Latinx population who bears the brunt of xenophobia and criminalization in association with their status. Even American-born Mexicans are asked about their status and face numerous occasions of xenophobia, despite being born in this country. There has been a failure in academia to pursue sufficient amounts of research on the white undocumented population, as many do come from Canada and Europe. Anti-immigration policy of course impacts *all* undocumented immigrants significantly, yet there is still a lot of analysis to be done on the role intersectionality plays in the undocumented experience. Because of this, I found that more research on the Eastern European undocumented experience is necessary.

My study focuses on how race and ethnicity influences Dreamers' experiences living in the United States. I will be using testimonies of four young undocumented

immigrants from Eastern Europe to display how different the experience for them has been compared to the Latinx undocumented experience. It is my hypothesis that there is a significant difference in experience between white undocumented immigrants and Latinx undocumented immigrants. I believe that white privilege has allowed for European and Canadian undocumented immigrants to live “in the shadows” more discretely due to the common narrative focusing on only Latinx immigrants. I hypothesize that Latinx immigrants are more weary of their status at all times, as they know their ethnicity might lead to questions about their status from police officers, employers, neighbors, etc. With this study I intend to prove that these differences in experience do exist, largely due to the country’s misinformation on undocumented immigration, along with racism and xenophobia towards non-white immigrants.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the past several years, academia has increased interest in the issue of undocumented immigration. There are many articles and journals one can find on how xenophobia and anti-immigration policy impacts immigrant communities nationwide. However, this research focuses exclusively on Latinx undocumented immigrants. Research that does touch on the presence of white undocumented immigrants only interviews those who came to the United States as adults, who at least have memory of their homeland and culture to help steer their identities. As we look into the white undocumented experience it is also important to consider what the Dreamers have to say, as they have their own experiences and stories to share about growing up in the United States without documentation. Despite there being these significant gaps in the literature



review, it has been still valuable to review them to see what previous research has found and use it as a foundation for my thesis.

## **1.5 Generation**

In their article “Awakening to a Nightmare”, Gonzales and Chavez investigate the struggles of the “1.5 Generation”, young undocumented immigrants who came to the country as minors and were raised in the United States without status (2012). Many refer to this undocumented subpopulation as “Dreamers”, in reference to the 2001 DREAM Act. While every undocumented immigrant’s story and situation is different, Gonzales and Chavez have shed light on a handful of common trends found within many to most Latino 1.5 Generationers. Despite growing up in the United States and being educated by the country’s public education system, these young individuals are prevented from calling themselves Americans due to their status. Lacking work authorization and a social security number, they are unable to partake in many of the everyday activities that citizens take for granted, such as getting a driver’s license, applying for FAFSA and jobs, and opening a bank account. Due to the hurdles that come with being undocumented, only 30.3% of the Latinx 1.5 Generation attends college (compared to 50% of Latinx legal residents). 23.5% have a family income over \$35,000 (compared to 67.6% of Latinx legal residents), 13% are homeowners (70%), and 42% have health insurance (71%) (Gonzales and Chavez, 2012). These statistics show that the undocumented 1.5 Generation faces significant barriers that keep them from being able to live a normal life. As said by one member of the 1.5 Generation, “I know I can do so much more, but I can’t because I can’t live wherever. I can’t choose where I live. I can’t choose where I work.... I can’t even hang out with my high school friends anymore and that hurts a lot.... I can’t

do anything that is 18 and over. I can't do anything.” (Gonzales & Chavez, 2012, p. 264) Undocumented youth, who were taught growing up that the United States is the “land of the free”, have found themselves to be extremely limited in the opportunities they can have in this country.

## **DACA**

Nearly a month after Gonzales and Chavez's article was published, the Obama administration announced the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. The program, which was created via Executive Order, allowed for undocumented immigrants who came to the United States as minors to receive a social security number, work authorization, and deferral from deportation for two years. Eligible applicants must have arrived in the United States before their 16<sup>th</sup> birthday, have continuously lived in the country since 2007, have a clean criminal record, and have their biometrics taken, on top of other requirements (United States Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2021). DACA has given many undocumented young people opportunities that otherwise would not have been available to them (Patler & Pirtle, 2018). While this program has certainly improved the lives of hundreds of thousands of beneficiaries and their families, there are valid criticisms of the program that need to be considered.

Firstly, DACA is obviously not a permanent solution to the United States' undocumented immigration problem. There are many young immigrants who, for various reasons, are not eligible for DACA and therefore cannot benefit from it. Secondly, immigration policy like this feeds the “good deserving immigrant” narrative, where immigrants must prove themselves as worthy of receiving legal status or protection from deportation in order to be treated with decency by the government (Abrego & Negrón-

Gonzales, 2020). Undocumented immigrants find themselves having to justify their “illegal” entry into the United States through traumatizing and exploitive stories of poverty, crime, and violence in their homeland countries. Undocumented immigrants constantly feel pressure to overcompensate for their lack of status by excelling in school, work, and extracurriculars. They are made to think that they must prove themselves through their professional and academic achievements; their accomplishments are expected to vouch for their worthiness and deserving of living in the United States, as if their humanness is not enough. “The mainstream narrative that depicts undocumented students as high achievers and valedictorians equates their worthiness and humanity solely with their academic excellence.” (Abrego & Negrón-Gonzales, 2020, p.46) This constant pressure, as *We Are Not Dreamers* discusses, causes severe anxiety and stress to the young undocumented community.

Nonetheless, research shows that DACA has significantly benefited recipients in several ways. Work authorization has given the 1.5 Generation the opportunity to work more skilled, safer, and higher-paying jobs. DACA has also decreased the likelihood of recipients facing the worker exploitation that many undocumented immigrants are forced to deal with in the workplace (Gonzales & Chavez, 2012). By being able to work and obtain a driver’s license, the DACA program has also made college an actual possibility to many recipients. In their survey sample, Patler and Pirtle have found DACA recipients to be more than twice as likely than non-DACA undocumented immigrants to obtain a bachelor’s degree or attend trade/vocational school: 14.37% compared to 6.25%, and 23.31% compared to 10.42%, respectively (2017). This shows that DACA has made it

more possible for recipients to continue their education beyond high school and to follow their educational and professional goals.

Studies have shown DACA to significantly improving recipients' physical and psychological wellbeing, as well. For one, DACA recipients have reported less stress and worry in relation to deportation and their legal status than undocumented immigrants without DACA status have (Patler & Pirtle, 2018). DACA recipients' stress levels have also been found to drastically decrease once after they received their updated status; much of their worries and anxieties in regard to their status subsided once they received DACA. Not surprisingly, there was no reported difference in anxieties about family deportations between undocumented youth without DACA and those with DACA, as the program only protects the individual from deportation, not their family. However, with the program alleviating some of the stress of not being able to attend college or get a driver's license or bank account, along with having the government's word on being temporarily protected from deportation, it comes as no surprise that Patler and Pirtle's research has found these results. They conclude that the DACA program has certainly improved the emotional wellbeing of recipients on a personal level, although worries about non-DACA family members remain present. These ongoing stressors (no social security number, no work authorization, etc.) continue to take a psychological toll on the undocumented families that it affects.

### **Immigration Trends of Eastern European Immigrants**

Until recently, the United States has seen a rapid increase in undocumented immigrants coming to the country from Eastern Europe over the past four decades. In 2010, for example, there were 93,000 undocumented immigrants from Poland living in

the U.S. In the years after the start of the new decade, however, the country had seen a rapid decrease in this population: just 39,000 in 2018 (Warren, 2020). This is largely due to two major factors: the improving economy in Eastern Europe, and many Eastern European countries' entry into the European Union between the years 2004-2013 (European Union, 2021). With the ability to live and work in any country in the Union, many Eastern European immigrants chose to leave the United States as undocumented immigrants to live in a country where they can receive adequate treatment, rights, and freedoms. Those who wanted to return to their homeland were able to do now that their economy was doing much better, and jobs and other opportunities were available. As a result of these policy changes within the Union, many of these Eastern European undocumented immigrants migrated either back to their countries of origin, or to western European nations, such as the United Kingdom, France, and Germany. While there are still Eastern European undocumented immigrants present in the United States today, the numbers are much slimmer than what they were before the 2010's.

Research has shown that most of these European immigrant families migrate in one of two ways. One is a remittance strategy, where an adult member of the household, typically male, will temporarily move to western Europe or the United States for better employment opportunities. They will work and send money to their families back home, with the plans of eventually returning to them. This allows for the immigrant to make more money while spending less on living expenses. Alternatively, the other migration method is for entire families to move to a new country together. Typically, this strategy is chosen to keep the family from being separated and to give the children better educational and lifestyle opportunities (Ryan et al., 2009). These families typically come

to the United States with the intentions of staying here for good, assuming all goes well, with the goal of eventually receiving legal status somehow. “The combination of non-financial and financial considerations is often constructed as a general quest for ‘normalcy’ where life is less of a struggle and individuals can plan ahead for their children’s future.” (Drinkwater & Garapich, 2015, p.1927) With little to no stability, happiness, or freedom in their homelands, coming to the United States illegally has become their only option for a better life.

### **The Role of White Privilege in Undocumented Immigration**

In their case study on Eastern European undocumented immigrants in the United States, Kiss and Asgari researched the unique experiences of this undocumented subpopulation (2015). The authors argue the importance of the discussion of white undocumented immigration, stating “an unintended consequence of such [current] research focus can undermine the diversity of the unauthorized immigrant population currently residing in the United States and may feed into stereotypic portrayal of the unauthorized immigrant” as strictly Latinx or Mexican (Kiss & Asgari, 2015, p.43). The study finds that European undocumented immigrants face less xenophobia than Latinx undocumented immigrants. One study interviewee from Poland stated, “...if you’re driving a car and you’re me, no one is gonna suspect you are illegal. If you look Hispanic, the first thing [police] are gonna ask is for your identity.” (Kiss & Asgari, 2015, p.51) Despite this, stress as a result of their legal status persists for European undocumented people. “Fear of deportation, limited employment opportunities, inability to travel outside of the United States, and impeded sense of belonging were among the most difficult challenges reported.” (Kiss & Asgari, 2015, p.56) While undocumented

individuals from Europe have been able to use their whiteness to avoid being targeted by society and law enforcement as “illegal”, “criminal”, etc., they are still very much prevented from living a free and authentic life as a result of the constraints of their undocumentedness.

Also interesting is the data that has come out from the United States’ 2020 presidential elections. Immigrant-heavy communities all over the country have shown an increase in votes for Donald Trump compared to voting data from the 2016 elections (Cai & Fessendon, 2020). In Chicago, communities with high populations of Eastern European immigrants have shown a significant rise in support of the former republican candidate. Communities such as Portage and Norwood Park, who are known for their influx of Polish immigrants, have increased their support for Donald Trump in 2020 by 10-30 points. This is surprising, considering the candidate was very much against both undocumented and legal migration. One would think these immigrant-heavy communities would either relate to or care for the immigrant community enough to not vote for the candidate who has expressed such negative thoughts about migrants. While undocumented individuals are ineligible to vote, their citizen children, family members, and friends can. As the saying goes: “birds of a feather flock together.” That being said, it is interesting to see that Chicagoland communities with heavy Eastern European populations had increased their support for Donald Trump, the candidate who was for tougher immigration policy and against undocumented immigration, from 2016 to 2020. Studies such as Kiss and Asgari’s have shown European undocumented immigrants to be aware of how their race has made their life as an undocumented immigrant easier than if they were a non-white immigrant. Yet voting data shows a contradiction amongst their

citizen counterparts. Further research must be done to assess how immigration status influences Eastern European immigrants' views on immigration issues.

Despite all the research that has been done on undocumented immigration, academia has failed to study the undocumented experience of Eastern European Dreamers. This group has gone through significant legislative limbo over the past decade, including the implementation and attempted rescission of DACA, and the election of Donald Trump as the United States' president. Because of these recent events, it is important that we hear from this group of young individuals and learn about their experience living in the United States without legal status in a time like today, where immigration legislation continues to be used as a bargaining tool by the country's elected officials. I believe that seeing whether their experiences are different from that of Latinx Dreamers' would be very valuable to academia and in policy implementation.

## METHODOLOGY

Participants for this study were scouted with the help of various Chicagoland universities' undocumented student recourse offices. Outreach emails were sent out by office administrators to students who have disclosed to the office as being undocumented and from Europe or white. The email called for participants who 1) are undocumented 2) came to the United States as minors and 3) were born in an Eastern European country. Interested individuals were asked to look over and complete an IRB-approved consent form. Those who completed the consent form were then contacted to schedule an anonymous individual interview via the video conferencing platform Zoom.



Four undocumented immigrants were interviewed for this research. The age of participants at the time of the interviews ranged from 21 to 37 years old. They were all born in Eastern Europe (either Poland or Czech Republic), and currently reside in the Chicagoland area. Three of the four interviewed have DACA, and one does not. (This individual did not have DACA due to coming to the United States after 2012 when the program was implemented.) Two interviewees are married, with one having American-born children. Everyone has either completed or is currently attending college. Three of the four are currently employed. The amount of time they have been living in the United States ranges from 5 to 26 years (arrived between 2000 and 2016). They have all come to the United States via plane, initially with some sort of temporary visa. By overstaying their visas, these participants have by default become undocumented.

For this research I used The Latina Feminist Group's *Telling To Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios* and their use of testimonio methodology to help guide me in creating the structure of these interviews and how I want to present my data. Participants were interviewed individually for approximately 1.50 hours to discuss their undocumented experience as a white/Eastern European immigrant without status. Questions were mostly open-ended, allowing interviewees to elaborate on their experience and emphasize parts of it in which they think to be relevant or most notable for this research. Questions included:

1. How has DACA impacted your life?
2. In what ways, if at all, do you believe your experience as an undocumented immigrant has been different than a Latinx person's experience?

3. Do you believe white privilege has played any role in your undocumented experience?
4. Have you ever felt like you are able to “live in the shadows” more than other undocumented immigrants because of your ethnicity?
5. Have you ever experienced xenophobia from others?
6. How do others tend to react when you tell them you are an immigrant? How do others tend to react when you tell them you are undocumented?

Interviewees were given the chance to share as much as they wished about their undocumented experience and were encouraged to discuss whatever else about their status that they believed to be important to mention. After each interview, the audio recordings were reviewed to create a written transcript of participants’ responses. Common themes and testimonies were then noted and compared to findings of past research to determine similarities and differences between the Latinx undocumented experience and the Eastern European experience.

## RESULTS

The findings of this research include verified common themes amongst the undocumented Dreamer community regardless of ethnicity, and new data that exemplifies a difference in experience between Latinx and Eastern European undocumented folks, particularly in how they are treated by others. From this study it appears that Eastern Europeans are faced with surprise and positive interest after telling

someone that they are immigrants. Many people were not even aware that Europeans can be undocumented until participants told them about their status. Additionally, participants expressed some interesting opinions on immigration and their status, hinting that the increase in support for Republican Donald Trump in Slavic Chicago neighborhoods during the 2020 elections was the result of conservative trends within the Eastern European immigrant community.

### **Background of Eastern European Dreamers**

As stated in the literature review, past research has found that the main reason for Eastern Europeans to migrate to other countries, whether that be with or without legal status, was for the lack of economic opportunity and social mobility during the 90's and early 2000's (Drinkwater & Garapich, 2015). This information is consistent with the testimonies of the participants of this study. All four interviewees have said they had come to the United States for a better life and opportunities, noting that their native countries were struggling economically, politically, and culturally. Those who came as infants made it clear that it was their parents' dream for them to get a better education and upbringing in the United States. They were too young to have any say in that decision-making process. One participant noted, "[my mom] was from a very small town, and she always wanted to achieve something more... I think she caught the 'U.S Bug', if you know what I mean. Back then, it was a huge difference between what was going on in Poland and what was going on here [in the United States]. It was my mom's dream that she wanted to give us a different opportunity." These accounts agree with the research previously mentioned in regard to Eastern European migration strategies, and reasons for leaving their native countries.

Two of the four interviewed said they came to the United States with the intentions of overstaying their visa, knowing from the start that they will be undocumented and very limited with their choices. Neither them nor their parents were aware just how difficult it would be living in the United States without legal status. There have since been policies put in place that make living in the United States without status more difficult, such as the Social Security Protection Act of 2004 (United States Social Security Administration, 2004). Their parents were able to obtain social security numbers and use them to open a bank account, get a driver's license, and get social security benefits. It wasn't until 2004 that this policy has taken place, meaning that while their parents were able to receive a social security number, the interviewees themselves were not. It has left them unable to get a driver's license and open a bank account as they grew up. This, of course, was before DACA was implemented, which then again allowed Dreamers to obtain a social security number and use it to do everyday things such as drive a car and get a job.

One undocumented immigrant from Poland shared her tragic story that led her with no other option but to come to the United States without documentation. Both of her parents have died when she as an adolescent, and all family members who had the means to take care of her were already living in the United States with legal status. At the age of 16, she was too old to be legally adopted by any of them, and living in her home country with no family to fall back on has played a financial and mental toll on her. Seeing no opportunities in Poland, she decided to reunite with her family by coming to live in the United States. Arriving to the country after the 2012 implementation of DACA, she has been living in the United States without legal status for five years at the time this thesis is

being written. Despite the struggles that she has faced living in the U.S., she claims to not regret her decision to come to this country. Being reconnected with her family once again was worth all the legal difficulties she has faced in the United States. These stories are not much different from the testimonies of other undocumented immigrants. Only one interviewee has claimed to regret coming to the United States without status, but she admits that her life has improved significantly since she left her country, and that she would not have the same educational or economic opportunities in her home country if she had stayed. Lack of opportunity and security has given immigrant families and children no choice but to come to the United States for a better life. In their situation there was no time nor money to come to the country in what some would consider “the right way”; this was an act of survival.

Two interviewees who have DACA both said their migration to the United States was something they have little to no memory of. The same goes for their memories of their homeland. They came to the United States at ages 3 and 4. Like most undocumented youth, they did not find out about their status until their parents found it to be the appropriate time to tell them. One participant from the Czech Republic found out she was undocumented at the age of 12, after she was diagnosed with cancer. Her one wish to the Make-A-Wish foundation was to visit France. It was then that her mother had to sit her down and tell her that she cannot have her wish fulfilled because she is undocumented. This disheartening story is one of many heard from Dreamers finding out about their legal status. Many assumed they were citizens and could live a normal life in this country, until it was time to apply for college or work or receive a driver’s license.

Similar to what Latinx Dreamers have said in previous studies, DACA has offered Eastern European 1.5 Generationers a sense of normalcy and belonging in the United States. All three DACA interviewees stated that had it not been for DACA, they would not be where they are today. DACA has allowed for these young immigrants to work and drive, and as a result has made attending college a possibility for them. DACA has also acted as a security blanket for these migrants, being reassured that they are safe for the time being and do not have to wake up every morning fearful of deportation. The results of the interviews show that there is no difference between Latinx and Eastern European Dreamers in terms of how DACA has impacted their lives.

### **Living in the Shadows**

Participants were also asked about their experiences and perceptions of white privilege in terms of their status. One of the major findings was that young Eastern European undocumented immigrants are fully aware of the advantages they have due to their ethnicity and race. Firstly, no one expects you to be undocumented if you are white. This can be verified through participants' testimonials of what they have heard people say about undocumented immigrants, not knowing that they were in fact talking to one at that moment. One Polish Dreamer recalled an interaction she had with a customer when she worked as a cashier at a major retail store. "I've had people throughout my life make xenophobic comments. Just because I look like them, they think that I think like them and that I support what they support. People are so comfortable to speak their minds about immigration and say what they do or don't like and what they think the law should be, but they have no idea that I'm exactly the undocumented person that they're talking about. I've been in that situation many times, and it's always awkward. When I once

cashiered at my job during the 2016 elections, a guy came up to me and started cheering that Trump is going to win, and that ‘he’s going to get them all out of here.’ I obviously knew who he meant. And I just thought *you’re literally talking about me.*” Because she is white and does not have an accent, the person assumed that she must also be against immigration, or at the very minimum would not mind if he made such xenophobic comments. Little did that individual know, however, that he was talking to an undocumented immigrant right then and there.

That same year the same Polish Dreamer had another eye-opening experience with her friends, where she realized just what kind of advantage her skin color gives her in this country. “One time I was hanging out at a friend’s house. It was four Latinx people and me. We were being loud, and it was right after the 2016 elections when tensions were really high. Someone in the group asked if a cop was to come to question us about the noise, who do we think would be questioned and picked on first? First it was the darkest-complexion Latino, then they put in order the other three. I asked, ‘What about me? What place do I fall in?’ and they said the cops wouldn’t even bother talking to me because I am ‘fine’. Little did that group know, though, that I was the only one who was undocumented. Everybody else was born in the United States. However, because they were darker than me, they would be picked on first and everyone knew it. And it’s true. I’ve never been questioned about my IDs or my authorizations, because I’m white and look like I belong.” These experiences make it evident that both citizens and law enforcement do not associate white people with undocumentedness the same way as they do with the Latinx community. This has allowed Eastern European undocumented immigrants to grow up with less suspicion and xenophobia from others about their status.

Others have also noted that they have received a lot of confusion from friends whenever they reveal to them that they are undocumented or have DACA. This is even true when they tell this to their Latinx friends who are undocumented themselves or have people in their families who are. “They say, ‘oh I didn’t know that Europeans can be undocumented, too.’ I’ve gotten that response so many times. People don’t know that it’s not just the Latinx community.” This shows that it is not only citizens who are misinformed about undocumented immigration, but even undocumented immigrants, too. The failure of media and politics to include non-Latinx undocumented folks in the conversation of undocumented immigration has caused the Latinx community to bear the brunt of xenophobic and anti-immigration hate in the United States. It leads the question, then, what the purpose of this Latinx-concentration is, especially considering that 29% of the undocumented population is not Latinx (Rosenblum & Ruiz, 2015). This would be an interesting topic for future research.

Another common theme found among testimonies is the romanticization of European immigration. When asked about their thoughts on the role of white privilege in undocumented immigration, one commented, “I think it’s both skin color and how well you’re able to speak the language that determines how people view you and your citizenship status. You see it in movies all the time. The Melania Trumps. You’re thought as this exquisiteness, versus the ‘you don’t belong here’ that other people get. And I think it has a lot to do with the color of our skin.” Participants have also mentioned instances of others being intrigued by their “foreign” names and native language, noting that they are certain this would not be their reaction if they spoke Spanish or had a predominantly-



Latinx name. It appears then that immigration, including undocumented, is sympathized a lot more in American society when the immigrant in question is white.

Evidence shows that European undocumented immigrants also face less scrutiny and bitterness from government and public officials. During an immigration trial, one Polish undocumented immigrant noticed a difference in treatment between her and Latinx immigrants awaiting their court hearings. “They weren’t treating them [Latinx immigrants] nicely. I think I was treated a little bit better, because Latinos were definitely being pushed and rushed.” Another testimony noted, “One time [my family and I] went to San Diego and someone told us there might be checkpoints on the way to Las Angeles, and we decided to not go. Looking back, we probably wouldn’t have even been stopped at the checkpoint because we’re white. No one would probably even consider asking us our status other than scanning our IDs. It was just my fear that stopped me, but I’m pretty sure we would have been okay just because we were white.” These statements affirm again that white undocumented immigrants are not targeted and criminalized as much as Latinx undocumented folks are.

Hearing these stories, I became curious as to what the actual deportation statistics are. After all, four testimonies aren’t necessarily enough to represent the entirety of the issue that is undocumented immigration. According to the Migration Policy Institute, there were 6,088,000 Mexican and 66,000 Polish undocumented immigrants living in the United States in 2013 (2015). That same year, 241,493 deportations were of Mexican citizens and 210 of Polish citizens (TRAC Reports, 2014). These numbers mean that 3.97% of Mexican undocumented immigrants were deported the same year that only .32% of Polish undocumented immigrants were targeted for deportation. This is not by

any means to say that the United States Department of Homeland Security should switch their focus to white/European undocumented immigrants. The data has been presented to show that the United States government really *does* focus on the removal of Latinx undocumented migrants significantly more than the removal of white undocumented migrants. This data goes to show that the issue of undocumented immigration truly is racialized and has targeted and criminalized certain ethnicities and races over others.

### **The Secrecy of Status**

Undocumented families from Eastern Europe also find themselves being very reluctant about ever disclosing their legal status to others. In this study alone, despite ensured confidentiality and substantial monetary compensation being provided, I found myself struggling to recruit European undocumented immigrants to participate. Out of the over 30 people who have been asked to partake in this study, only two people who did not already know me were willing to be interviewed. This outcome is in alignment with what participants have included in their testimonies. It appears there is a culture of secrecy and shame amongst undocumented Eastern Europeans that prevents them from speaking openly, even amongst themselves, about their status. “I don’t think European people are as vocal about [their undocumented status]. I know I wasn’t. When I made the decision to stay here even my aunt told me to not ever tell anyone about my legal status. I can definitely see that European people are less vocal about it and try to keep it a secret. I think it may be shame. If you’re in a room full of people who do have the right to live in the U.S. you don’t necessarily feel picked on, but you know [you are undocumented] even if they don’t.” The ability for undocumented immigrants to live “in the shadows” more securely allows for them to hide their status more successfully, causing great fear of

their undocumented status every being potentially discovered by someone who they do not feel comfortable knowing.

### **Conservatism within Eastern Europeans**

The last interesting common theme found from these Dreamers' testimonies is conservative ideologies within the Eastern European immigrant communities, both documented and undocumented. My results have come to add a new layer to the findings of Cai and Fessenden's article, "Immigrant Neighborhoods Shifted Red as the Country Chose Blue." (2020) Because the Republican candidate was so blatantly against all forms of immigration, political scientists were surprised to see that in the 2020 presidential elections many immigrant-heavy communities, including those in Chicago, had increased their votes for Donald Trump since the 2016 elections. This was also true for the northern Chicagoland Slavic communities. With these results being so, I asked participants about their reaction to the election of Donald Trump for president in 2016. All interviewees expressed opposition towards the former president and have acknowledged the privileges that come with being a white undocumented immigrant. Yet the question did bring interesting perspectives regarding immigration policy in the United States. "My views are pretty conservative. If you ever ask me which way I will be leaning, I will always lean a little bit more Republican than liberal or Democratic. It's not any different with immigration for me. Unlimited immigration is impossible. It has to be controlled, like everything else. There has to be rules that need to be followed." This individual has been waiting since 2007 for her approved application for a visa sponsorship from a family member to be finalized, and in the meantime has been maintaining her DACA status.

Other interviewees held apologetic attitudes about their undocumented status and their presence in the United States, making comments such as that they do not belong in the United States and that they are now paying the consequences of “breaking the rules.” This signals a theme of conservatism and anti-immigration thinking within this immigrant community. It is particularly interesting when one ties this with the “secrecy of status” findings mentioned earlier. These cultural norms have certainly had an impact on Eastern European Dreamers and their acceptance of their undocumented status. While this research does not necessarily examine the conservative political trends of Eastern Europeans in the United States, I do believe this to be something academia should investigate more in the future. Doing so will help us get a better understanding of the immigrant experience of European Americans today.

## CONCLUSION

This research has investigated the undocumented experience of Eastern European Dreamers. The main finding of this study is that while DACA has improved the lives of white and Latinx recipients in the same way, white privilege has allowed the Eastern European Dreamers to live “in the shadows” easier and more freely compared to Dreamers who are Latinx. Additionally, conservative cultural norms of Eastern Europe have influenced the way Dreamers see their place in the United States as undocumented immigrants.

Immigrants from Poland and the Czech Republic have given their own personal testimonies to attest to these differences in experience. When asked for their immigration

policy recommendations, interviewees have suggested for the United States government to implement a clear and practical pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants— one that cannot be revoked when a new administration takes office. They have added that if this is too much to ask for, then they ask at the minimum for the United States government to permanentize the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program. They would also like to see the program’s window be extended to include more current young Dreamers. With that, I believe that an opportunity for a proper pathway to citizenship to all undocumented people living in the United States is the appropriate solution for the immigration issue the United States has been facing for decades. At the time this is being written, the American Dream and Promise Act of 2021, which would grant undocumented immigrants permanent residency and an eventual pathway to citizenship, has passed in the United States’ House of Representatives and is currently sitting in the Senate. It is my policy recommendation that legislatures stand behind this bill and pass it into law.

Limitations of this study included small sample sizing and a lack of diversity within the Eastern Europeans’ country of origin. Due to the constraints of my study, it was not possible to prevent these limitations. Because of this, I would recommend for researchers to continue investigating this topic and hearing more testimonials about the white undocumented experience. This includes hearing testimonials from Canadian and Western European undocumented folks. Additionally, I believe it would be very valuable for academia to conduct more research on conservatism withing Eastern European immigrant communities and how these political ideologies affect the country’s immigrant population as a whole. The better we understand how these subgroups of the immigrant

community operate, I believe we can get a better understanding of how the United States' immigration system has become what it is today.

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