

# **How Are Invisible Communities of Immigrants in the United States Counted? What Happens If They're Undercounted?**

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## **Abstract**

In this paper, I first identify the reasons why undocumented immigrants don't have legal documentation. Then I describe the current methods that exist to count the current unauthorized immigrant population in the United States which is estimated to be over 11 million. I then analyze the data I have collected on the topic of Migration-Trust Networks (the social networks of undocumented immigrants) and the existing literature on undocumented immigration to identify the cultural, social and economic circumstances that would not allow them to be counted in the 2020 Census. So far, the findings suggest that the current methods to estimate this population still don't lead to exact estimates given that undocumented immigrants live in mixed-status families and in segregated communities due to their membership in Migration-Trust Networks. In the end, I conclude that the potential for a large census undercount of the undocumented immigrants and their U.S. citizen family members can end up hurting the number of seats in Congress, but also can end up depriving of amenities and resources not just the undocumented immigrants, but also all American now living in the United States.

**Key Words:** Invisibility, Undocumented Immigration, Migration-Trust Networks, Census Undercount

## **1. Introduction**

Undocumented immigrants are terrorized and afraid now more than ever before due to the latest series of anti-immigrant manifestations shown by the Trump administration. They have seen how this administration has launched massive raids like the one in Mississippi in which 680 people were arrested (Jordan, 2019). They have seen how President Trump has begun building his Wall at the U.S.-Mexico border (CBP, 2020). Undocumented immigrants have seen how the Trump Administration has ordered for the refugees from Central America to be attacked with tear gas at the U.S.-Mexico border (BBC News, 2018), placed children in cages (Merchant 2018), and made the attempt to take away DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) from the undocumented youth (Bush, 2017). Therefore, undocumented immigrants in the U.S. today are extremely scared of government authorities. Given this situation, it is very likely that today more than ever before, undocumented immigrants now living in the U.S. will make themselves and their families invisible and avoid being counted in the 2020 Census. To make it even worse, President Trump on July 21<sup>st</sup>, 2020 signed a memorandum (or an executive order) instructing the U.S. Census Bureau not to include undocumented immigrants in the final count which will determine how many seats Congress will get from each state while the

U.S. Constitution requires that the seats in Congress be appointed based on the ‘whole number of persons’ counted in each state during each of the decennial censuses (Levine, 2020).

Today, according to estimates from the Pew Research Center there are approximately almost 11 million undocumented immigrants living in the United States (Passel, 2019). This means that these undocumented immigrants have homes, send their children to school, need medical services, use public parks and public libraries, use public transportation and also use all the amenities and resources that everyone else utilizes to be able to live a life in the United States. In this paper, I talk about how undocumented immigrants are invisible citizens which makes it very difficult for them to be counted in the decennial 2020 Census. There is not a way for us to know for sure the exact number of undocumented immigrants right now living in the United States, all we know about them are computed estimates. In this paper, first I explain the reason why these immigrants are undocumented, then I explain how the estimates of the number of undocumented immigrants in the U.S. are computed and why I believe that the estimates can be inaccurate given the high level of invisibility of these immigrants, and finally, I discuss the consequences of the undocumented immigrants being undercounted in the 2020 Census. One of the biggest problems I discuss regarding the computed estimates is that these immigrants live in mixed-status families. According to the Pew Research Center, on average these undocumented immigrants have been living in the U.S. for more than 15 years (Taylor et al., 2011). This means that they have U.S. born children, and they are married to other family members who are either legal residents or are U.S. citizens. Therefore, it is possible that if these undocumented immigrants pretend to make themselves invisible and avoid being counted in the census, chances are that in reality, we will also be missing to count their U.S. born family members as well.

### 1.1 Why are they undocumented?

In order to understand why approximately 11 million immigrants today are undocumented, we first need to understand why they haven’t legalized themselves given that the majority have been living in the United States for over 15 years. Is it because they can’t afford to pay the legal fees? Or is it that they do not want to stand in the back of the line? Well, the fact is that there is no line (Flores-Yeffal, 2019). If there was a way for these immigrants to apply for legalization, then immigrants would rather apply than live without documents with the fear of arrest and deportation. Most of these immigrants are undocumented not because they want to be, but because the immigration system in the U.S. is outdated, broken and because the U.S. don’t want to offer legal visas to those workers the U.S. labor market really needs.

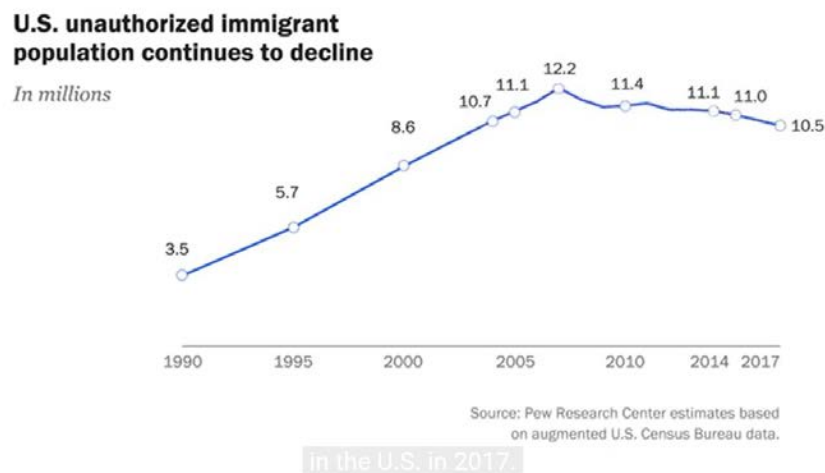
Our immigration laws do not want to award visas to fill those jobs that Americans don’t want to do, such as, in agriculture, meat packing, janitorial jobs, construction, etc. In a pool done by the Pew as many as 77 percent of Americans responded that they believe undocumented immigrants work in the type of jobs that U.S. citizens don’t want (Krogstad et al., 2020). Therefore, most of these workers who want to come legally to the United States cannot do it the legal way. For them, there is no line at all to do so (Flores-Yeffal, 2019). The fact is that the U.S. has a huge demand of unskilled labor, but only 10,000 visas are awarded to unskilled workers every year (Flores-Yeffal, 2019). Therefore, as the market reaches an equilibrium from supply and demand, most undocumented immigrants come attracted by the huge demand of cheap labor, but they have to do it so, undocumented. Employer sanctions were enacted in 1986 together with the Immigration Reform and

Control Act of 1986 (IRCA), but those employer sanction laws have never been enforced (Flores-Yeffal, 2019). Historically, since the end of World War II, Mexican immigrants have done agricultural jobs in the U.S. as part of the Bracero program; during the Bracero program most immigrants came legally from Mexico (at total of 5 million for a period of 22 years). Then in 1964 after the Bracero program ended and that is when the undocumented immigrant Era began (Massey, Durand and Malone, 2002).

Undocumented immigrants are now trapped permanent undocumented residents in the United States because they cannot longer go back and forth to their home countries, like they used to do so during the 1980s due to the militarization of the U.S.-Mexico border. According to Massey, Durand & Malone (2002), since crossing the border without documents was relatively easier during the early 1980s, then undocumented immigrants used to only come for a year or two, saved some money, and then they would go back to their country of origin to re-unite with their families. The militarization of the border since 1993 due to IRCA has forced undocumented immigrants to cross through harsher terrain, therefore, losing their lives. On average, 400 undocumented immigrants lost their lives every year since 1993. Therefore, for decades now, undocumented immigrants instead of going back and forth, they decided to be settled in the United States permanently (Massey, Durand & Malone, 2002). Now, these undocumented immigrants are living in the United States using all the same amenities as the U.S. Citizens and the accurate funding to pay for these amenities will depend on the correct count of the 2020 Census.

**1.2 How is the number of undocumented immigrants in the country estimated?**

The demographer Jeffrey Passel (2020), who works at the Pew Research Center has been estimating the number of undocumented immigrants in the country since the 1980s. Right now, as shown on Figure 1, the current estimate suggest that the current unauthorized immigrant population nears 11 million.

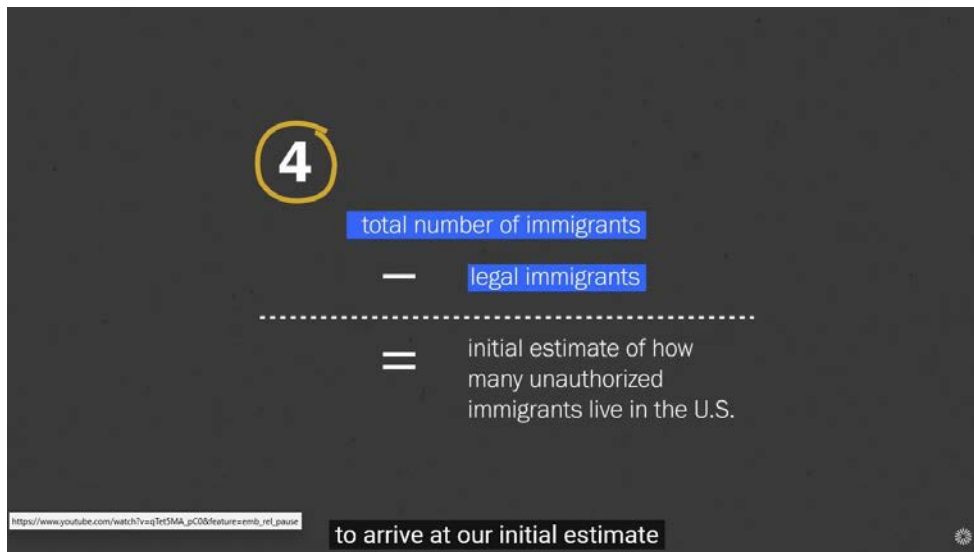


**Figure 1:** Estimates of the unauthorized population living in the U.S. by Jeffrey Passel. Source: Pew Research Center based on augmented U.S. Census Bureau Data (Passel, 2020).

There are two ways in which one can identify the undocumented or unauthorized immigrants, those who cross the border without permission, and those who violate the terms of their visa and overstay their visas (such as those who travel with tourist visas, for example). Two types of data are used to calculate an approximate number of unauthorized immigrants, U.S. Census data and data from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS).

Census data used comes from the American Community Survey (ACS) which suggests that approximately 3.5 million households have foreign born population currently living in the United States. One can also use the information from the Current Population Survey (CPS). Both, surveys ask where people were born and if they are U.S. citizens, but not if these immigrants are legally in the U.S. or not, but the Pew has been using only ACS data since 2005 to estimate the number of unauthorized immigrants in the United States.

Then the estimate for the total number of foreign born immigrants, one then looks at the data provided from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) (which used to be the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS)) which provides statistics on how many legal immigrants currently live in the United States (those with green cards, and those with working visas, etc.). Then also the total number of refugees admitted are gotten from either the Office of Refugee Resettlement or from the Department of Health and Human Services. Therefore, then a population estimate of number of lawful immigrants in the United States is computed using standard demographic techniques that account for deaths and people leaving the U.S. plus the number of arrivals each year. What is done then is to apply the residual method in which the total number of legal immigrants is subtracted from the total foreign-born population resulting in the initial estimate of the unauthorized foreign born population in the U.S. as shown in Figure 2.



**Figure 2:** The figure shows how the Residual Method is applied for calculating the number of Unauthorized immigrants in the United States by the Pew. Source: (Passel, 2019).

Then the next step is to adjust for the numbers of unauthorized immigrants that are missed in the ACS survey. To do this the Pew relies on the Census undercount and on survey data which state whether Mexicans participated in the Census or not during the previous decennial census and from surveys done in Mexico as Mexicans account for almost half of the U.S. unauthorized population (Passel, 2019). In most cases, they end up making upward adjustments to their initial estimates for undercount on a range of 5 to 15 percent which is greater for some groups such as, young adults and those immigrants who have recently arrived. Therefore, this is how the current 11 million undocumented immigrants were calculated by the Pew. I argue that in reality there can be even more undocumented immigrants living in the U.S. than those estimated by the Pew given that undocumented immigrants have the need to make themselves and their family members invisible due to fear, therefore, their survey participation can decrease. In addition, there are many other factors that could contribute to this additional undercount.

### **1.3 Why would the above estimates be underestimated in future calculations? How?**

The Census 2020 was applied in a way in which most people have to answer online, and it is not taking into account the digital divide that still exists in the year 2020 (Simama, 2020). Unfortunately, given the high levels of poverty in which undocumented immigrants live, many of them might not be able to respond to the Census, even if they wanted to due to their lack of access to the Internet. It was reported by the Census Bureau in the past few days that so far the online overall response nationally only was about 50%, while the overall response using all methods has been so far only 62.3%.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, this new approach of making the Census online can be a huge problem added to the already expected undercount numbers from previous Censuses. Then also the Coronavirus pandemic can also become a problem. In addition, traditionally, immigrants, ethnic and racial minorities and renters and those who live in “hard-to-count circumstances are undercounted in censuses (Census Bureau, 2012). Another problem is that Hispanics have difficulty filling out the racial census question as being Hispanic is not a race and they have to identify themselves as “white” and so they are most of the time uncertain to what racial category applies to them (Ordway, 2019).

## **2. Migrants Invisibility**

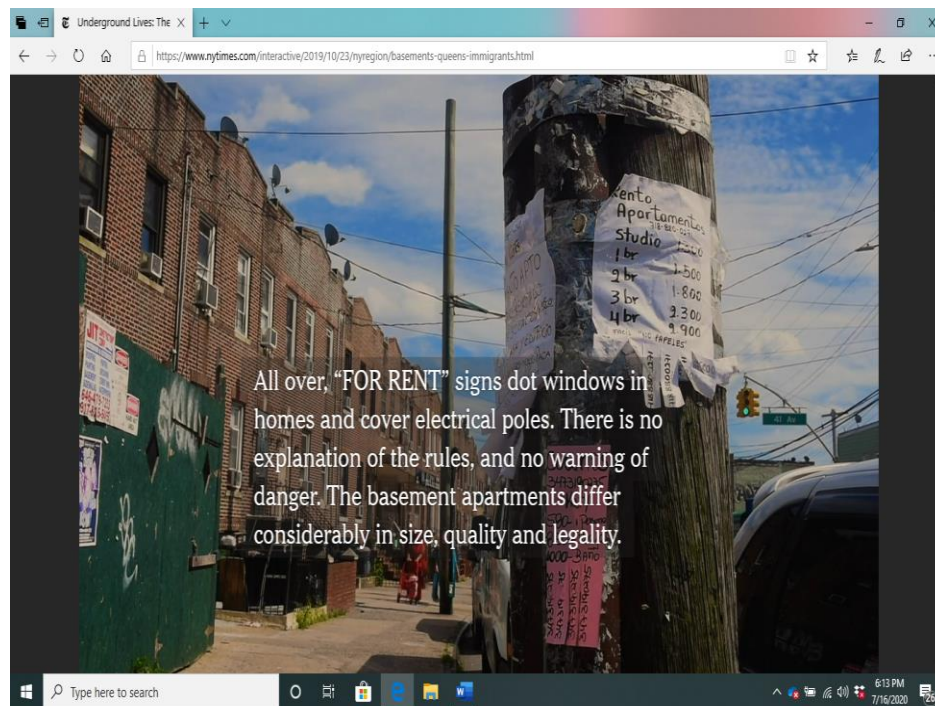
### **2.1 Undocumented Immigrants Making Themselves Invisible:**

An important issue to explore here is how the undocumented immigrants make themselves invisible to avoid deportation. For example, undocumented immigrants rely on what I call, Migration-Trust Networks (see Flores-Yeffal 2013) which are migrant networks driven by trust relations in order to find where to live once they arrive to the United States and during their settlement process. They settle door to door near each other or they live together in order to support each other and provide transportation, find jobs, and babysit their children to each other, etc. Therefore, as they find jobs in the immigrant labor niches, they also rely on the other members of the Migration-Trust Network for other things and for social support, therefore, these segregation, and often, crowding arrangements can happen very easily as they are absorbed by the Migration-Trust Networks which serve as their safety net so they can be able to live as undocumented immigrants in the U.S. without being too much at risk of being deported (Flores-Yeffal, 2013).

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.2020census.gov/en/response-rates.html>

In addition, their housing arrangements can be one of the most challenging issues to deal with when trying for them to answer the Census or even just a survey, or to even make an accurate estimation of their numbers. For example, in New York in which the real state market is so expensive, the immigrants have to live in tenements or in crowded apartments or basements in order to afford a living quarter given their low salaries (Stewart et al., 2019). For example, Figure 3 shows a picture from an article from the NY Times for apartments for rent which warns that there are no rules and no warning of any danger for those interested. In addition, as we can see, the prices are too expensive as one studio is being rented for \$1,300. This means that if these immigrants make minimum wage, plus they need to send money back home, that several of them would have to share that studio in order to afford somewhere to live. There are many people who live in crowded basements in New York and chances are that they are not included in the Census counts as the landlords could be the ones who receive the Census form and they might be afraid to report that they are indeed renting their basement to several undocumented immigrants afraid of receiving a fine due to a safety violation. For example, in these immigrant tenements in NY immigrants live in 64 sq. foot cubicles (Ling, 2019).



**Figure 3:** Screenshot from the NY Times article on immigrants living underground in Queens, New York, source: (Stewart et al. 2019).

Other undocumented immigrants live in homes and work as domestic workers, or as security guards who take care of rural farms, etc. At times, their employers don't want to report those workers living in their homes because they don't want to expose themselves as they might have the workers working under exploitative conditions, or without benefits, etc.; or simply because they are undocumented. It is possible that these other types of workers are not counted either in the Census. Therefore, there is a huge chance that these undocumented immigrants are undercounted in the Census and even in the ACS. Furthermore, there are a lot of immigrants living in trailer parks and in trailer homes all

over the nation. It is because they either move around, or because they can't afford an apartment that they have to live under these conditions. Many live in RV parks, but others just park wherever they can, therefore, they don't necessarily have a street address where they can be surveyed.

### 2.1.1 *What about their family members?*

According to a report from the Center of Migration Studies approximately 5.5 million U.S. born children of Undocumented immigrants were living in the U.S. in 2013 (Warren, 2013). Also, if we consider the spouses and other relatives of unauthorized immigrants, it was estimated in 2013 that at least 16.7 million people were sharing a home with at least one family member, often a parent, who was an unauthorized immigrant; being almost six million of these people the children of these undocumented immigrants who were under the age of 18 (U.S. Citizen Children Impacted by Immigration Enforcement, 2019).

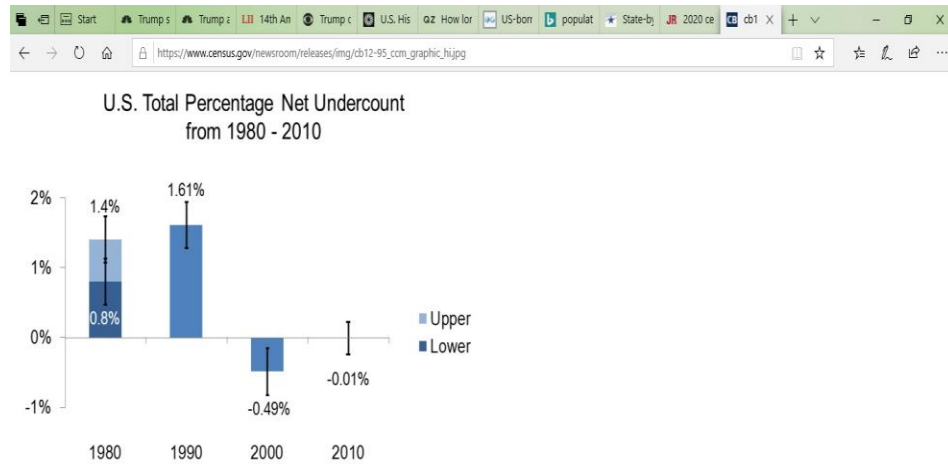
Therefore, according to the theory of Migration-Trust Networks, the undocumented immigrants are very likely to live together with their mixed-status families inside these Migration-Trust Network immigrant enclaves. Therefore, it is very likely that if the unauthorized immigrants make themselves invisible, that their family members who are U.S. citizens also become invisible as they are living with their undocumented family member(s). But you might be asking yourself, if they are married with U.S. citizens, then they'll probably qualify for legalization under the family reunification program established in 1965. Well, unfortunately given the changes in immigration law that came in place in 1996 with IIRIRA or The Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 (Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigration Responsibility Act, 2020). It made it more difficult for those who were married to U.S. citizens to legalize themselves, as it posed a ban for 10 years if they had entered the country without inspection. This means that if they wanted to regularize their status, they had to leave the United States and live in their home country for 10 years (separated from their families) before they could petition their Permanent Residency. For this reason, nowadays there are thousands of undocumented immigrants living with their U.S. citizen spouse and they haven't been able to regularize their immigration status either. Therefore, this means that there is the potential that we will not only miss counting the undocumented immigrants, but also their family members who are also citizens.

If we take the estimates of both, the undocumented immigrants and their family members, this means that overall, 11 million undocumented immigrants + 16.7 million family members; this means that we are at risk of not counting in the Census 2020 as many as 28 million people. If the U.S. has 329 million people, this means that we're are probably at risk of not counting about 8% of the U.S. population who could be making themselves invisible during the 2020 U.S. Census count. Even if we were to only not be able to count half of these immigrants and their family member, we would be missing to count about four percent of the U.S. population.

Figure 5 below shows how so far in all the past three U.S. Censuses we only had a small percentage of the population considered as net undercounted, also considering those who were overcounted (such as those people who were counted twice, like college students, for example), minus those who were undercounted which equals the net undercount. This suggests that it is possible that the net undercount might not be adjusting correctly for the



amount of people being missed who are part of the undocumented immigrant population, including their U.S. citizen family members.



**Figure 5:** U.S. Total Percentage Net Undercount from 1980 to 2010 from the U.S. Census Bureau. (Source: The Census Bureau).

### 2.1.2 *So what can be the consequences of not counting the undocumented immigrants and their U.S. born family members?*

Not counting or including in the Census the undocumented population and potentially also their family members can have very serious consequences not just for the undocumented immigrants themselves, but also for the rest of the U.S. population. First of all, there will be a problem determining how the 435 seats in the U.S. House of Representatives will be distributed among the 50 states, and therefore, some states will get more seats than they should and some will get fewer seats. The states that would lose seats would probably be those states in which the undocumented immigrant population is greater. In addition, Census information is used to adjust the Electoral College and to make decisions on how to distribute the funds for hundreds of federal programs — “from Medicaid and food stamps to highway construction and special education (Ordway, 2019).” In addition, federal, state, and local governments also rely on the Census counts to allocate resources regarding infrastructure, transportation, schools, urban development, medical services and the like. Without the correct counts a lot of communities, in particular those in which a lot of immigrants live, will be underfunded as a result.

Undocumented immigrants are now here in the United States living as permanent residents (despite their lack of legal status). They have been attracted because Americans have been giving them jobs, and so they have been taking those jobs and settling in communities all over the country. In fact, according to the Migration-Trust Networks theory, most of them have had a job already waiting for them even before arriving to the



United States. This is because American companies usually recruit them through their Migration-Trust Networks. For example, the employers identify the good working ethic of their fellow migrants, and then they ask their employees (the undocumented migrants) to recruit more migrants for them who possess the same working ethic, and so the migrants call their paisanos (*countryman*) or family members back home and help them to come to the United States, and so on and so forth (Flores-Yeffal, 2013). Even with the pandemic and even with a border Wall, and even with the high risk of dying in the border crossing attempt, people still migrate to the United States without legal documents because they already have a job waiting for them that Americans don't want to do. They also have the support and the safety net of their Migration-Trust Network members who offer them all the support necessary for them to survive and live in the U.S. without legal documentation. They live among other U.S. citizens, work for them, are friends with them, are married to them, and have children who are U.S. born citizens.

### Discussion

In this paper, we first have examined the issue of why is the case that undocumented immigrants don't have legal documents. Then, we examined how the number of undocumented immigrants is estimated by the Pew Research Center. It is important to state here that similar methodology for estimating the number of undocumented immigrants in the U.S. is also used by other researchers in the field of international migration (i.e., Kerwin and Warren, 2020). I have also presented evidence that shows that given that undocumented immigrants rely on Migration-Trust Networks for a safety net as a result of their undocumented status, they self-segregate and isolate themselves from the rest of the population and live at times in precarious, informal and crowded conditions which can make more difficult their participation on the Census count and/or in surveys. Furthermore, we also considered the fact that they also live with spouses and children who are U.S. born citizens and who also live in these Migration-Trust Networks with them. Therefore, I suggest in this paper that as much as four to eight percent of the U.S. population could be undercounted due to the invisibility of this population as a result of fear. Furthermore, we have also discussed how if undocumented immigrants and their family members are undercounted, then there would be a lot of serious consequences for all Americans, among them, losing congress seats for some states and losing funding for essential amenities to communities all over the nation in which these immigrants also live.

These undocumented immigrants are an important part of the U.S. society whether we want it or not. They have the same needs as everyone else who lives in the United States. They rent homes, own homes, own cars, drive the same roads, use public transportation, send their children to schools and have the same needs as everyone else do. These undocumented immigrants also need medical care, hospitals, to use public libraries, and so on and so forth. In fact, they help to drive the economy as it was found that 74 percent of the undocumented immigrants are essential workers (Kerwin and Warren, 2020). In addition, these undocumented immigrants are also consumers and utilize people's services, even the services of U.S. born citizens; they buy clothes, buy food at grocery stores, use gasoline, go to restaurants, and get a lot of other services from other American citizens as well.

We cannot pretend they are not here just because the system wants to deny them legalization and insists on making them invisible and second-class citizens. As everyone lives in the United States, not counting undocumented immigrants and their U.S. born

family members will hurt all Americans, although, the Americans of some states will be more hurt than those who live in other states, but in the end, undocumented immigrants nowadays live all over the nation (see, U.S. unauthorized immigrant population estimates by state, 2016, 2019). Therefore, all Americans and undocumented immigrants living currently in the U.S. will be hurt as a result. This suggests that trying to make undocumented immigrants a population of second-class citizens, not allowing them to acquire some type of legalization, it is not just resulting in serious consequences for them, but as a result of the Census undercount, it will also result in serious consequences for the rest of the population in the United States.

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