

# Buen Crédito y Buen Seguro: Legal Status and Restricted Access to Shelter among Low-Income Latina/o Renters in an Immigrant Gateway City

Steven Schmidt<sup>id</sup>

University of Southern California, USA

## ABSTRACT

Sociologists have shown how searches for rental housing reproduce inequalities by race/ethnicity and household income in the United States. Yet scholars know comparatively less about how legal status may also limit access to shelter. To address this gap, this article compares the housing careers of 30 low-income, undocumented/mixed-status, Mexican, Central American, and South American families with those of ten low-income, predominantly Mexican, U.S. citizen/LPR families across 103 total moves in Los Angeles, California. Though citizen and undocumented renters moved for similar reasons, the process of finding a new home varied substantially across these two groups. Renters' legal status became salient during the screening portion of rental applications, which requested a credit and background check, a verifiable income, and banking information for each household adult. As a result, undocumented renters were excluded from most formal rentals. Instead, these families searched for sympathetic managers or doubled up with friends, family members, and non-kin. Despite these barriers, undocumented and mixed-status families achieved greater housing security over time by transitioning from guests to hosts in doubled up homes. These findings extend prior research on how housing searches stratify movers, the housing careers of Latino immigrant families, and the punitive consequences of illegality.

**KEYWORDS:** residential mobility; immigrant illegality; urban inequality; housing

About one third of all U.S. households, representing 44 million families, rent their home (Joint Center for Housing Studies 2022). Renters' neighborhoods, housing conditions, and living arrangements are consequential for family wellbeing and the reproduction of inequality in cities (Harvey 2020; Solari and Mare 2012; Swope and Hernández 2019). Given these links, an extensive literature has documented how barriers encountered during rental housing searches disadvantage low-income, minority renters and stratify moving families (DeLuca and Jang-Trettien 2020; Desmond, Gershenson, and Kiviat 2015; Desmond and Shollenberger 2015; Harvey et al. 2020; Krysan and Crowder 2017). However, most research does not distinguish renters' housing search experiences by nativity or legal status. As a result, less is known about how an undocumented legal status shapes access to shelter,

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or how renters navigate legal status-related barriers during moves. An estimated 7.9 million undocumented immigrants rent their home, representing about 72 percent of the total undocumented population (Migration Policy Institute 2019). Because housing shapes the wellbeing of adults and children alike, whether and how undocumented renters can access shelter has consequences for the upward social mobility of immigrant families.

I address this gap by examining the rental housing search experiences of Latino immigrants in particular, who make up the majority of the undocumented population in the United States (Passel and Cohn 2019) and approximately 39 percent of whom live with U.S.-born children (Passel and Cohn 2016). How does an undocumented legal status shape access to shelter for low-income, Latino renters with children? To answer this question, I examine the housing careers—or the “succession of housing states, events, and transitions” (Coulter and van Ham 2019:870)—of 40 Mexican, Central American, South American and Mexican-American renters with children who live in the City of Los Angeles. Using semi-structured interview data from these 40 renters, I compare the moves of 30 predominantly low-income, undocumented/mixed-status families with those of ten low-income, citizen or permanent resident households.

Tracing 103 moves across these 40 families, I find that citizen and undocumented renters move for similar reasons, but that the process of finding a new home is particularly burdensome for renters who lack an authorized legal status. Contemporary tenant screening technologies that rely on U.S.-based financial histories and access to U.S. financial institutions disadvantage undocumented movers. Many undocumented immigrants reported cash-based incomes, contingent employment, limited access to credit, and household expenses related to their legal status. These exclusions from the formal labor market, social safety net, and financial institutions accumulated to constrain undocumented renters’ housing options during moves compared to citizen families. In response, undocumented and mixed-status families searched for rentals with fewer screening requirements or circumvented formal tenant screening by doubling up with friends, family members, or strangers. Despite these obstacles, most undocumented respondents achieved greater housing security over time by transitioning away from doubled-up living arrangements where they were guests and into homes where they hosted others. Taken together, these findings advance our understanding of how housing searches stratify U.S. renters, the housing careers of Latino immigrants, and how the punitive consequences of illegality proliferate through families.

## BACKGROUND

Where families live and in what conditions is consequential for the educational attainment of their children (Solari and Mare 2012), exposure to neighborhood hazards (Marcelli, Power, and Spalding 2001), and physical health (Harvey 2020; Krieger and Higgins 2002; Swope and Hernández 2019). Housing plays a central role in the intergenerational transmission of disadvantage (Swope and Hernández 2019), and this link has motivated research into how families arrive at specific homes and living arrangements, as well as the structural barriers that families face during moves (DeLuca and Jang-Trettien 2020; DeLuca and Rosen 2022; Harvey et al. 2020; Krysan and Crowder 2017; Reost 2021). Despite extensive attention to these barriers, less is known about the residential mobility experiences of Latino immigrant renters, or how renters’ legal status stratifies access to shelter. Past residential mobility research suggests that the housing opportunities available to undocumented renters could be constrained in three primary ways.

First, unforeseen circumstances that prompt sudden “reactive moves” may leave undocumented/mixed-status families with little time to identify and evaluate different housing options, compared to citizens (DeLuca and Jang-Trettien 2020; DeLuca et al. 2019; Harvey et al. 2020). The risk of a reactive move is unequally distributed across U.S. households. For instance, Latino families experience foreclosure (Reid et al. 2017) and eviction (Desmond and Shollenberger 2015) at higher rates than non-Hispanic white households. Latino immigrants also double up—or live with an adult who is not a romantic partner or an adult child—at higher rates than non-Hispanic white, U.S.-born families (Pilkauskas, Garfinkel, and McLanahan 2014). Though doubling up can assist renters financially (Ahrentzen 2003; Pilkauskas et al. 2014), doubled-up households are vulnerable to reactive moves, as restricted autonomy, unclear norms, and lack of privacy can destabilize these living arrangements

(Harvey 2022; Skobba and Goetz 2015). Higher rates of involuntary moves could limit the housing searches of undocumented renters compared to citizens.

Second, additional financial constraints associated with an undocumented legal status and informal labor market participation could restrict undocumented renters' housing opportunities. Undocumented renters have limited access to state assistance, increasing household expenditures in other areas (Flavin et al. 2018). Renters with fewer financial resources may be reluctant to move away from supportive social networks, limiting their neighborhood destinations, or they may double up to save on housing costs (Boyd 2008; Carrillo et al. 2016; Skobba and Goetz 2015). Landlords also ask prospective tenants to prove that they have a stable income (Reosti 2020). However, undocumented immigrants often work in jobs that are irregular, informal, and cash-based (Chávez and Flores 1987; Hudson 2007). It is possible that undocumented renters' additional household expenses and informal labor market participation limit access to shelter compared to citizens.

Third, it is likely that the use of credit and background checks during the rental application stage of moves disadvantages undocumented tenants. Landlords increasingly rely on credit and background checks to screen potential tenants (Rosen, Garboden, and Cossyleon 2021; So 2022), a practice that reproduces racial inequalities in rental housing access. Tenant screening based on credit and background checks leads to lengthy, stressful, and expensive housing searches for renters who hold negative credentials, such as damaged credit or a felony conviction (Reosti 2021). Credit scores are calculated using U.S.-based financial histories, and undocumented immigrants have historically been excluded from U.S. financial institutions (Drever and Blue 2011). Given the fact that nearly one in three Hispanic consumers is credit invisible (Consumer Financial Protection Bureau 2016), credit-based screening could disproportionately impact Latino immigrant families during moves.

Though renters' legal status could feasibly influence moves through each of the pathways described above, little residential mobility research considers legal status as a barrier to accessing safe and stable shelter. Most prior work on housing searches focuses on the experiences of U.S. citizens (see DeLuca and Jang-Trettien 2020; DeLuca et al. 2019; Harvey et al. 2020; Krysan and Crowder 2017; Reosti 2021; Rosenblatt and DeLuca 2012). With several exceptions (Asad and Rosen 2019; Carrillo et al. 2016), the housing decisions of Latino immigrants are understudied. Given the centrality of housing costs, conditions, and location to the reproduction of inequality (Krieger and Higgins 2002; Swope and Hernández 2019), whether and how legal status limits access to rental housing has implications for the social stratification of Latino immigrant families in the United States.

Past research on the housing careers of Latino immigrant families examines how immigrants find homes after migrating, what the challenges with neighborhood attainment and housing quality are, and whether and how these families transition into homeownership. Immigrants lean on their social ties for housing assistance after arriving to the United States (Menjívar 2000), and U.S.-based social networks influence migration destinations (Sue, Riosmena, and LePree 2018). Both immigrant and citizen Latino households face greater barriers moving to lower-poverty neighborhoods, compared to non-Hispanic white households with similar incomes (South, Crowder, and Chavez 2005). When moving, undocumented immigrants may seek out racially diverse neighborhoods to avoid state detection and to minimize the threat of deportation (Asad and Rosen 2019). Latino immigrants also face challenges vis-à-vis housing quality and homeownership. Among renters, undocumented Latino families are more likely than Latino U.S. citizens or permanent residents to live in crowded units (Díaz McConnell 2015b; Hall and Greenman 2013). Household crowding is linked to lower educational outcomes among children (Solari and Mare 2012) and poorer health outcomes among adults (Evans, Wells, and Moch 2003). Compared to Latino citizens, undocumented immigrants are also more likely to live in homes with physical quality problems (Hall and Greenman 2013) and within low-income neighborhoods (Cort, Lin, and Stevenson 2014). Undocumented immigrants are also less likely to own a home compared to native-born Latinos or authorized non-citizens (Díaz McConnell 2015a; Hall and Greenman 2013).

However, several facets of Latino immigrants' housing careers in the United States remain understudied. First, less is known about how Latino immigrants house their families after they arrive to the United States but prior to purchasing a home. Given the fact that nearly 75 percent of undocumented immigrants are renters (Migration Policy Institute 2019), additional research is needed to examine how legal status shapes Latino renters' housing careers over time. Second, though sociologists have shown

how legal status constrains neighborhood choices (see [Asad and Rosen 2019](#); [Carrillo et al. 2016](#)), how undocumented immigrants and their families fare during tenant screening is underexplored. Tenant screening plays a critical role in sorting renters into homes ([Reosti 2020](#); [Rosen et al. 2021](#)), and examining undocumented immigrants' housing searches can help explain how and why these families arrive at lower quality housing, net of other salient factors such as household income ([Hall and Greenman 2013](#)).

For theoretical clarity, I borrow insights from the illegality literature, which examines how the sociolegal construction of illegal immigration operates as a subject position that stratifies U.S. residents ([De Genova 2002](#); [Gonzales and Ruszczyk 2021](#); [Menjívar and Abrego 2012](#)). The production of illegality results in state-sanctioned "legal violence" against immigrant communities ([Menjívar and Abrego 2012](#)). For individuals, holding an undocumented legal status facilitates exploitative work conditions ([De Genova 2002](#)), depresses wages ([Hall, Greenman, and Farkas 2010](#)), and can create additional responsibilities for children and other family members ([Delgado 2022](#); [Dreby 2012](#)). Because an undocumented legal status constrains life chances in these multiple domains, it operates as a "master status" and key mechanism of social stratification for immigrants and their children ([Gonzales and Ruszczyk 2021](#)).

The punitive consequences of an undocumented legal status also proliferate to citizen family members. [Enriquez \(2015\)](#) uses the term "multigenerational punishment" to theorize how the children of immigrants experience penalties from their parents' legal status. I use [Enriquez's \(2015\)](#) concept of multigenerational punishment to connect legal status, rental housing careers, and family wellbeing. Housing conditions, costs, and location are consequential for children's health and play an important role in the reproduction of inequality ([Swope and Hernández 2019](#)). Yet past scholarship on the consequences of immigrant illegality for families has underexamined how legal status shapes how immigrant renters house their children. In this article, I address this gap by showing how the punitive consequences of an undocumented legal status proliferate to the children of immigrants, in part, by restricting the housing opportunities that are available to their parents.

### The Present Study

The present study offers several contributions to the existing literature. First, it identifies legal status as an understudied credential during housing searches that restricts access to shelter for immigrant families, with consequences for the social stratification of undocumented immigrants in the United States. In doing so, this article builds out past research on the housing careers of Latino immigrant households, which has largely focused on immigrant destinations ([Sue et al. 2018](#)), housing conditions and neighborhood attainment ([Asad and Rosen 2019](#); [Díaz McConnell 2015b](#); [Hall and Greenman 2013](#)), and transitions into homeownership ([Díaz McConnell and Marcelli 2007](#)). This study also identifies an understudied housing transition for Latino immigrants—moving from doubling up as guests to doubling up as hosts—that has consequences for renters' housing stability. Finally, it extends prior work on the punitive consequences of illegality for immigrant families ([Enriquez 2015](#); [Menjívar and Abrego 2012](#)) by showing how immigrants navigate and manage an undocumented legal status not only at work, school, and in family life, but also as they seek out housing opportunities in the United States.

### DATA AND METHODS

I use 40 semi-structured interviews with predominantly low-income, citizen and undocumented, Mexican, Central American, South American, and Mexican-American renters living in the City of Los Angeles (hereafter, Los Angeles). As a historic gateway destination for Mexican and Central American immigrants, Los Angeles offers a strategic site for examining how legal status shapes rental housing searches. Nearly one in five LA County residents is undocumented or lives with an undocumented family member ([Otero et al. 2021](#)), and approximately 75 percent of undocumented immigrants in California more broadly rent their home ([Davalos, Kimberlin, and Mesquita 2021](#)). Despite the ubiquity of renting within this population, rental requirements in Los Angeles present significant challenges for undocumented families. California landlords can require up to three months' rent to sign a

lease, a Social Security Number (SSN) or Individual Tax Identification Number (ITIN) to conduct a credit and background check, and an application fee of \$35 to \$50 per adult applicant. Applicants can be required to provide pay stubs, W-2 tax returns, bank statements, and rental histories. California allows a “no blanks” policy on rental applications, meaning that failure to provide any requested information can lead to an automatic rejection.

These interviews are drawn from a broader study of renters’ housing search experiences in three Los Angeles neighborhoods. The broader study recruited non-Hispanic white and Latina/o, low and middle-income renters who lived with children.<sup>1</sup> In the present study, I use an analytic subsample of predominantly low-income, citizen and undocumented Latina/o renters to examine how legal status shapes access to shelter. I exclude middle-income, citizen Latina/o renters to avoid conflating the benefits of holding U.S. citizenship during moves with the benefits of a higher income.

### Neighborhood Selection, Sampling, and Recruitment

Los Angeles consists of 114 official neighborhoods. Within Los Angeles, I recruited respondents from three demographically similar but geographically distant neighborhoods: Canoga Park, North Hollywood, and Mar Vista. The research design of the broader project informed neighborhood selection. I sought to interview an equal number of low and middle-income, Latino and non-Hispanic white renters within *each* neighborhood, and I used the American Community Survey to identify three LA neighborhoods where recruiting these families would be feasible (i.e., neighborhoods that were majority-renter and diverse across race/ethnicity and household income).<sup>2</sup> As I noted no major differences in housing searches by neighborhood, I do not distinguish between neighborhoods in the present study.

I recruited and interviewed 17 renters in-person by canvassing parks and public spaces in each neighborhood in late 2019 and early 2020. After the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, I recruited 15 respondents through an advertisement placed on Facebook/Instagram and eight respondents through a bilingual postcard mailed directly to their address. For Facebook/Instagram advertisements, I placed a geotargeted, bilingual ad that appeared to users in each neighborhood. The advertisement invited viewers to complete a screening survey that I used to contact eligible respondents. Facebook/Instagram advertisements have been used to recruit respondents in prior sociological studies and provide coverage similar to a telephone sampling frame (see [Storer, Schneider, and Harknett 2020](#)). I used a supplementary, address-based sampling approach to reach respondents who were potentially not active on social media ([Fowler et al. 2020](#)). I used USPS’s Every Door Direct Mail service to mail a bilingual postcard to every residential address along three postal routes (one in each neighborhood) that ran through areas with high concentrations of multifamily rentals. All 23 virtually-recruited interviews occurred over the phone. I asked to speak with the household member with the most knowledge of their family’s last move. This yielded four interviews with men and 36 interviews with women. Though women are heavily over-represented in this sample, this likely reflects a gendered division of housing search labor within families.

### Sample Characteristics

Thirty respondents in this subsample belonged to families with at least one undocumented adult household member (typically the respondent or their romantic partner), while ten respondents belonged to households that consisted entirely of U.S. citizens or lawful permanent residents (LPRs). Respondents belonging to undocumented and mixed-status families were from Mexico (18), Guatemala (six), El Salvador (two), the United States (two Mexican, U.S. citizen women in relationships with undocumented, Mexican men), Honduras (one), and Peru (one). Most families (27) were mixed-status, consisting of one or more undocumented parents and at least one U.S.-born citizen

<sup>1</sup> In 2019, HUD classified a three person household in LA County as very low-income if they earned below \$47,000/year ([California Department of Housing and Community Development 2019](#)).

<sup>2</sup> I included neighborhoods whose proportion of non-Hispanic white residents ranged from 20 to 50 percent (relative to a city average of 27 percent) and whose proportion of Latino residents ranged from 30 to 60 percent (relative to a city average of 48 percent). I excluded neighborhoods with fewer than 10,000 residents (given recruitment feasibility concerns), neighborhoods with household incomes clustered near the top of the income distribution, neighborhoods with a low average household size (2.0 residents or below), and neighborhoods with four-year universities. Among this pool, I chose three neighborhoods in different geographic areas of Los Angeles.

child. Three families consisted of both undocumented parents and undocumented children. Most undocumented respondents and their partners worked in construction, domestic work, or restaurants, whereas the six higher earners worked as a foreman, non-profit manager, carpenter/upholsterer, and in other trades. All U.S. citizen respondents (nine) were second-generation immigrants and identified as Mexican or Mexican-American. One low-income, Venezuelan household consisted entirely of lawful permanent residents. Citizen/LPR respondents worked in retail, education, and the service sector (as hairdressers, parking lot attendants, and other similar jobs). Overall, undocumented/mixed-status families reported a median income of \$33,600 (including higher earners), and citizen/LPR families reported a median income of \$35,750.

### The Interview Protocol

During interviews, I asked about respondents' experiences in their current home, their past housing searches and living arrangements, and their future housing plans. In total, I collected information about 103 discrete housing searches across these 40 respondents. I asked immigrant respondents about their housing arrangements since they had moved to the United States, and I asked citizen respondents about their housing arrangements since they had moved out of their parental home. To improve recall, I also asked questions about respondents' life circumstances concurrent to their moves (Nelson 2010). I provide several sample interview questions in online [Appendix A](#). Interviews lasted between one and two hours, and I paid interviewees \$30 for their time. Interviews were audio-recorded with the oral consent of participants. At the end of each interview, I gave respondents a resource packet with information about legal aid and tenants' rights organizations working in their neighborhood, LA's COVID-19 tenant protections, and city and state-wide COVID-19 rent relief programs. I conducted 28 interviews in Spanish and 12 in English, and I use endnotes to indicate where I have translated interview excerpts. Quotes in the original Spanish can be found in online [Appendix B](#). All interview excerpts are anonymized.

### Researcher Positionality

My social position shaped the types of questions that I first set out to answer in the broader research study. As a non-Hispanic white citizen, I was not initially aware of renters' legal status as a major constraint during housing searches. However, at the beginning of the study, several immigrant respondents shared that their undocumented status posed a significant barrier during their last move, and I adjusted my interview guide to capture legal status-related challenges. Because of our non-congruent social positions and the stigmatization of immigrant illegality in the United States (Del Real 2019), I anticipate that respondents underreported legal status-related issues during their housing search. It is likely that this article presents a conservative accounting of how renters' legal status shaped their moves.

### Data Analysis

I conducted two rounds of coding using verbatim transcripts and the qualitative data analysis platform ATLAS.ti. First, I coded deductively for themes of theoretical interest from the interview guide. Then, I wrote a series of analytic memos—first, a memo for each respondent describing their housing career over time, and second, memos that summarized themes arising inductively from the data. These included topics such as motivations for moving, challenges related to doubling up, and how families approached rental applications. After memo writing, I conducted a second round of coding. This abductive approach allowed me to test for the presence or absence of theoretically-derived themes, while also enabling me to identify new insights from the data (Timmermans and Tavory 2012).

## RESULTS

### Why Undocumented, Mixed-status, and Citizen Latino Families Move

Consistent with prior research on the moves of Latino immigrant families (Carrillo et al. 2016), I find that undocumented and citizen respondents alike predominantly experienced reactive moves away from doubled-up homes (DeLuca and Jang-Trettien 2020; DeLuca et al. 2019). I use DeLuca and colleagues' (2019) definition of a reactive move as an unplanned move prompted by events such as conflict and friction in shared housing, eviction or other landlord actions (such as building sales

or rent increases), housing quality failure, relationship dissolution, or negative changes in household finances. Approximately 70 percent of renters across legal status experienced a reactive move. In contrast, voluntary moves are planned, for reasons such as moving closer to a job opportunity or family, or moving due to an increase in family income. As summarized in **Table 1**, most families moved when their current living arrangement became untenable, primarily due to intrahousehold conflicts (e.g., disagreements over how families use shared spaces or shared costs), informal evictions (e.g., being told to leave a room rental), and affordability shocks (e.g., rent increases, sudden household expenses, or unemployment).

A majority of families (25), across immigration status, last moved away from doubled-up living arrangements where they were a guest in another household. Renters reported that limited privacy and space, co-parenting with hosts, and delegating household chores often led to interpersonal conflicts that strained these arrangements. For example, Laurie (Mexican, U.S. citizen, low-income) last moved from an apartment that she shared with her parents, siblings, and her five-year-old son. Laurie told me that she struggled to see eye-to-eye with her mother, and after one particularly difficult argument, her parents told her to leave the home: “We had a big fight, we just didn’t get along at all... I had three days

**Table 1.** Housing Search and Sample Characteristics

	Undoc./Mixed-status		Citizens/LPRs	
	N	%/Median	N	%/Median
% very low income (below \$47,000)	24	80%	9	90%
Reactive move				
Relationship dissolution	1	3%	3	30%
Poor maintenance	2	7%	1	10%
Conflict in shared home	6	20%	1	10%
Affordability shock	7	23%	1	10%
Evicted/told to leave shared home	5	17%	1	10%
Voluntary move				
Wanted more space	6	20%	1	10%
Wanted different neighborhood	0	0%	1	10%
Closer to job	2	7%	1	10%
Marriage	1	3%	0	0%
Length of search				
Less than one month	11	37%	7	70%
One to six months	12	40%	3	30%
Over six months	5	17%	0	0%
How entered current unit				
Fewer requirements	11	37%	1	10%
Doubled up (guest; together)	11	37%	1	10%
Referral/word-of-mouth	10	33%	4	40%
Found online	4	13%	3	30%
Household crowding <sup>a</sup> (current home)				
< 1 PPR	1	3%	2	20%
Between 1 and 2 PPR	21	70%	7	70%
> 2 PPR	8	27%	1	10%
Household crowding (PPR), median	-	2.0	-	1.3
Total respondents	30	100%	10	100%

Notes: Search strategy percentages do not add up to 100, as some respondents reported using multiple strategies to enter their current unit.

<sup>a</sup> I calculated each household’s PPR (people per room) by dividing the total number of apartment residents by the total number of rooms (bedrooms and the living room).

to move, I had no intention of moving out when I did." Similarly, Claudia (Peruvian, undocumented, low-income) told me about her last home—a bedroom that she, her husband, and children rented from a family friend—where limited space strained her family relationships and also led to conflicts with the primary tenant: "When we were in that room, we fought a lot. Just words, nothing else, but we went to bed angry. We didn't talk for days because we were so stressed, we were so packed in."<sup>3</sup> She added: "It was really uncomfortable, that's why I was in a rush to get out."<sup>4</sup>

Doubled-up families also exited shared homes when they failed to reach an agreement about how to cover household costs. For instance, Cristián's (Salvadoran, undocumented, middle-income) last home was a rented bedroom in a single-family home where he lived with his wife and two elementary-aged sons. However, he moved out after a conflict with the primary tenant over unresolved utility use: "It was uncomfortable because they were always telling me, 'Don't use too much water!' But you're charging me for water. 'Don't use the air conditioner so much! Turn it off, use the fan instead'... No, we're leaving. *Así no se puede*. If they're charging you for everything, you should be able to use it."<sup>5</sup> Disagreements over shared household expenses also destabilized doubled-up living arrangements for guests, prompting moves. Other respondents moved due to relationship dissolution, rent increases, changes in family finances (e.g., medical bills or unemployment), and severe habitability failures (e.g., an unattended sewage leak). Citizen and undocumented renters alike predominantly experienced reactive moves away from their last home.

### Housing Search Barriers: Legal Status and Tenant Screening

Though undocumented and citizen families moved for similar reasons, undocumented movers reported longer, more uncertain, and stressful housing searches compared to citizen households. In particular, the rental application stage of moves constrained the housing opportunities available to undocumented renters and their children. Renters' legal status became salient during the tenant screening stage of housing searches in two primary ways: through irregular and limited household finances and through credit and background checks that relied on U.S.-based financial histories.

#### *Legal status and household income.*

Most undocumented respondents reported that they and their romantic partners worked in care work, construction, and similar service-related trades. Their incomes were frequently irregular, cash-based, and more difficult to verify according to what landlords require—a combination of employer pay stubs, W-2 tax returns, and bank statements. For instance, Monica—a low-income, Mexican, U.S. citizen whose husband was undocumented—encountered this challenge during her last move. Without an SSN, her husband was paid in cash and did not have the income documentation that most apartment buildings required. Monica eventually met a building manager who was familiar with the restaurant where she and her husband both worked: "He knew that we worked, where we worked, so he knew the place. And he gave us a break, he said, 'Well, just have your boss write a letter.'" Letter in hand, Monica and her family were approved to rent the unit after two months of active searching. In contrast, citizen families working in the formal labor market rarely reported challenges acquiring the documents landlords requested to verify their income and employment.

In addition to challenges related to income documentation, an undocumented legal status increased household expenditures in other areas. These increased expenses, in turn, influenced families' financial decision-making around housing. For example, Inés, her husband, and two young children were from Mexico and were undocumented, which limited her family's access to Medi-Cal—California's Medicaid health care program—compared to mixed-status families with citizen children. After her oldest daughter sustained a serious injury at sports practice, Inés decided to downsize to a smaller, one-bedroom unit to cover the additional cost of her daughter's medical bills. As she told me: "My daughters and I are Mexican... we don't have papers, they don't qualify for Medi-Cal, just the emergency service. The rest, I have to cover."<sup>6</sup> She reflected on her smaller apartment: "The price is good, and since they hurt my daughter, I'm spending on medicine, I have to take her to the hospital,

<sup>3</sup> Translated from Spanish.

<sup>4</sup> Translated from Spanish

<sup>5</sup> Translated from Spanish.

<sup>6</sup> Translated from Spanish.

sometimes four or five times per month... so the only thing we could do was come here.”<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Clara, a Honduran, low-income renter, recently moved with her undocumented husband, toddler, and newborn into a studio apartment that cost \$1200 per month. She was concurrently paying \$250 each month in attorney’s fees to try to regularize her own legal status—money that she estimated she could use to move to a unit with more space for her family. Clara was living paycheck to paycheck, and she had decided to delay her move for now: “We’ve lived in this studio for two years and we’re looking for something else, but truthfully, it’s expensive. A one bedroom apartment, you can’t find one for less than \$1400.”<sup>8</sup> As Clara reported, once she completes her payments to her lawyer, she aspires to use her savings to move to a larger home. Citizen households with similar incomes were largely exempted from these additional expenses.

#### *Legal status and credit checks.*

With limited or no access to credit, undocumented renters reported credit and background checks as another hurdle during moves, contributing to lengthy and stressful housing searches. Credit checks can be conducted with ITINs, a government issued identification number available to undocumented immigrants. However, renters reported that landlords and managers frequently requested SSNs during rental applications, with few options to provide an ITIN. Adela’s (Mexican, undocumented, low-income) experience during her last housing search exemplifies this trend. Describing her move, she explained: “It was really difficult, really complicated.”<sup>9</sup> Adela, her husband, and two teenage children had to move after their building was sold, but she struggled to find a rental that did not request an SSN or a credit check: “That’s another barrier we face, us Latinos, immigrants, we need a big bank deposit and a social, a good record, excellent credit. Well, we don’t have a lot or really any of those things. That makes it doubly difficult.”<sup>10</sup> Eventually, her 14-year-old daughter found a rental online, and Adela verbally confirmed that the manager would not conduct a credit check. “It wasn’t what I wanted,” she told me, “but my kids need a home to live in.”<sup>11</sup> Clara (introduced above) and her husband also struggled to find a home without an SSN. Here, she recalls the stress she experienced during her search: “Everywhere, they asked us for a good social, good credit. It was a stressful time. I was crying, I didn’t sleep, I didn’t eat, nothing.”<sup>12</sup> Because credit/background checks rely on U.S.-based financial histories, and because landlords frequently ask for an SSN for each adult to conduct the credit/background check, the ubiquity of credit-based screening ruled out most undocumented and mixed-status families.

Even middle-income undocumented/mixed-status families reported credit-based challenges during their moves. For instance, Sofi (Mexican, U.S. citizen, middle-income) worked as a case manager for a local non-profit. Although she and her husband were middle-income earners, her husband’s legal status disqualified them from most rentals. As she recalled: “It was so hard. He doesn’t have documents... so because of his legal status, I would go online and I would try to see what apartments would take ITIN, because he has an ITIN. But I was very limited. No apartments take it.” Cristián (Salvadoran, undocumented, middle-income) recounted a similar experience during his last move:

The first thing [they ask is], “Do you have papers?” and I said, “No, but can you still rent to me? I’m going to pay, I can show you I’m a good person.” I brought documents from my country, my passport and ID, everything... and even then, they told me no.<sup>13</sup>

Cristián, who ultimately found an informal sublease through an acquaintance at work, reported that his legal status screened him out of the formal rental market. Although screening tenants based on national origin is illegal, landlords and managers are permitted to reject potential occupants based on their credit history—a practice that disadvantages families who are not U.S. citizens or permanent residents and who face barriers accessing credit. These factors combined to limit the housing

<sup>7</sup> Translated from Spanish.

<sup>8</sup> Translated from Spanish.

<sup>9</sup> Translated from Spanish.

<sup>10</sup> Translated from Spanish.

<sup>11</sup> Translated from Spanish.

<sup>12</sup> Translated from Spanish.

<sup>13</sup> Translated from Spanish.

opportunities available to undocumented and mixed-status families and produced lengthy, stressful, and uncertain moves. As Table 1 summarizes, 36 percent (11) of undocumented respondents were able to move in one month or less, 40 percent (12) moved between one and six months, and 17 percent (5) took over six months to find a new home.<sup>14</sup>

### How Families Move: Housing Search Strategies

Given the obstacles that undocumented and mixed-status families face on the rental market, how did these renters find homes? Compared to citizen families, I find that undocumented renters mobilized two main tactics to navigate their legal status during moves. First, while citizen renters submitted applications despite holding damaged credit or low household incomes, undocumented renters engaged in pre-screening practices, where they assessed the likelihood that they would be accepted or rejected before submitting an application. Second, undocumented/mixed-status families doubled up with friends, family members, or strangers, allowing them to move around formal tenant screenings.

#### *Housing search strategies: pre-screening apartments.*

Without an SSN or a credit history, undocumented and mixed-status families were hesitant to spend limited funds to apply to units where rejection seemed certain. Similar to Reosti's (2021) negatively credentialed respondents, these families selectively applied to units where they believed that they stood a better chance of being approved. For instance, during Laura's (Mexican, undocumented, low-income) move, she told me, "We only applied to a few places because as soon as they told us they were going to check our credit and if we had a social, it was 'Alright, no.'"<sup>15</sup> Fabi (Guatemalan, undocumented, low-income) reported that she and her husband went to visit three apartments before arriving at their current one-bedroom. As she recalled: "They gave us applications, but they told us that we had to have credit for them to approve us... we ended up not even applying."<sup>16</sup> Without the required credit record, application costs add up quickly. Inés (Mexican, undocumented, low-income) and her husband applied to ten apartments—at a total cost of \$1000 in application fees—before they were approved to rent their current home. "We were desperate," she recalled, "and we really felt that we were just spending money on applications and no one responded, all of it was hard."<sup>17</sup>

Instead, undocumented renters strategized with building managers to assess their odds of being approved before applying. Not every apartment complex required a credit and background check in order to submit an application. For instance, Claudia (Peruvian, undocumented, low-income) struggled to find an apartment and used the following strategy:

Upfront, I told [managers], "I don't have a social, an ID number, or any credit," just so they wouldn't waste their time and I wouldn't waste mine. So some people told me, "No, without those things you can't apply," and others told me, "Sure, come and give us your information."<sup>18</sup>

By frankly discussing her legal status with managers, Claudia found buildings where her application would not be rejected out-of-hand. Managers also facilitated entry into units by waiving or replacing certain requirements. Recall that Monica's building manager was willing to accept a letter from her boss in lieu of a W-2 to vouch for her husband's cash-based income. Other renters mobilized their networks to help them identify buildings with flexible entry requirements. Teresa (Mexican, undocumented, low-income) found her current home through her sister, who organized a *cundina* (a rotating savings and credit association). As her sister visited apartment buildings across her neighborhood to collect money, she noticed a two-bedroom unit for rent and approached the building manager to

<sup>14</sup> Two respondents were not actively searching for a new home when they last moved.

<sup>15</sup> Translated from Spanish.

<sup>16</sup> Translated from Spanish.

<sup>17</sup> Translated from Spanish.

<sup>18</sup> Translated from Spanish.

discuss the application. The manager confirmed that they required a consular ID and one month's rent as a deposit. She also agreed that Teresa's family could pay the deposit across multiple months instead of a lump sum. With information from her sister in hand, Teresa and her husband applied for the apartment and were approved.

In contrast, though low-income citizen renters also faced credit-related challenges, they continued to submit applications to units because they anticipated the outcome could work out in their favor. For example, when I asked Max (Mexican-American, U.S. citizen, low-income) how he felt when he applied to rent his current apartment, he told me: "We were a little nervous about it, because I know they did a credit check, and then, we did have some credit debt... we were scared they may not accept us." Though Max was worried that their credit history would disqualify them, he and his wife were approved to rent the unit. Laurie (introduced above) described a similar feeling when she applied to her first-choice apartment, located near a highly-rated elementary school where she hoped to enroll her son: "I was nervous that I wasn't gonna get it. Because I had no credit at the time, none." Despite her thin credit record, Laurie was approved and moved within several days. Though low-income Latino citizen renters also held damaged or limited credit records, these respondents rarely avoided applying to homes in their price range purely due to low credit.

#### *Housing search strategies: doubling up.*

In addition to limiting their applications and preemptively screening potential housing providers, undocumented renters also found housing opportunities by doubling up with others. I consider a respondent to be doubled-up if they live with another adult who is not a romantic partner or adult child (Pilkauskas et al. 2014). By applying to units with multiple working adults or seeking out informal rentals from friends, family members, and strangers, respondents moved through or around formal tenant screenings.

Renting informally offered opportunities for families to find homes without submitting an application to the landlord or building manager. I categorize these rentals as informal because families in this sample almost universally rented from other renters. These subleases usually occurred without a written contract and were often disallowed by the primary renters' lease. Respondents most often doubled up with friends and family, but a substantial minority of renters doubled up with strangers. Primary leaseholders screen potential roommates in ways that make informal rentals more attainable for undocumented families. For instance, Lisa (Mexican, undocumented, low-income) told me that she struggled to find an apartment that would rent to her and her elementary-aged children without an SSN. Lisa wanted to move urgently due to a domestic violence dispute between her roommate and her roommate's husband. After searching for almost seven months, she found an opportunity to sublease a room from another renter nearby:

I was walking my kids to school, and I saw a sign saying they were renting a bedroom. So I got the number and called the woman and went to see the room. We talked and she told me, "You seem like a good person, so I'll rent you the room."<sup>19</sup>

Screened out of formal rentals because she lacked an SSN, Lisa found an opportunity to rent informally, and she successfully passed her roommate's own ad hoc background check. While Lisa found a home with a stranger, others moved in with friends or family members in established apartments to help bypass strict tenant screenings. Sofi (introduced above) was unable to find an apartment complex that would accept her undocumented husband's ITIN, so Sofi and her husband decided to move in with Sofi's mother-in-law, who also rented in the same neighborhood and sublet her spare bedroom for extra income. As Sofi put it: "She's like, I'm not going to let you guys struggle. I'd rather give you the space." Highlighting the relative instability of doubling up as a guest, Sofi's mother-in-law told her other tenant to vacate the room to allow her own family to move in.

<sup>19</sup> Translated from Spanish.

### Acquiring Housing Stability Over Time: Transitioning from Guests to Hosts

Despite these structural barriers, undocumented/mixed-status families achieved comparatively greater housing security across moves, in part by transitioning away from guest living arrangements and into living arrangements where they hosted others. Doubling up as hosts allowed renters to establish the terms of these arrangements (Harvey 2022). Respondents reported limited authority compared to hosts regarding rules about using common spaces, child care and discipline, and household costs. Cristián (introduced above), who lived in a rented bedroom with his wife and two sons, summarized this imbalance: “When you live in [someone else’s] home, there are always rules and you have to follow them. You don’t have any other option.”<sup>20</sup> Lily (Mexican, U.S. citizen, low-income) concurred: “It’s definitely challenging when you live with somebody else and the rules are different. Because then you feel like you have to obey by their rules because you are living under their roof.” Apart from moving out, guests had little recourse to contest the terms of their living arrangement.

#### *Leaving guest arrangements.*

However, across moves, both undocumented and citizen families transitioned away from homes where they were doubled up as guests. **Table 2** tracks respondents’ living arrangements over time. Though 11 undocumented respondents had doubled up together or as guests when they entered their current home, only three were living as guests at the time of our interview. In fact, 13 undocumented respondents were *hosting* a guest themselves. Both undocumented and citizen families moved out of guest living arrangements, but undocumented renters more frequently reported hosting others at the time of the interview or for extended periods in the past. Transitioning to hosting others helps renters manage high housing costs, all while reducing the potential instabilities associated with shared homes.

Most commonly, renters transitioned from guests to hosts by remaining in a home after their host moved out. Lisa (introduced above) found an informal rental opportunity while walking to her daughters’ school and moved into a bedroom that she rented from an older woman. Lisa’s roommate recently immigrated back to Guatemala to retire. As a result, Lisa was able to take over the lease herself:

**Table 2.** Living Arrangements over Time

	Undoc./Mixed-status		Citizens/LPRs	
	N	% Total	N	% Total
<b>Prior living arrangement, last unit</b>				
Doubled-up (host)	2	7%	0	0%
Doubled-up (guest)	18	60%	7	70%
Doubled-up (together)	0	0%	0	0%
Not doubled up	10	33%	3	30%
<b>Living arrangement, when entered unit</b>				
Doubled-up (host)	0	0%	1	10%
Doubled-up (guest)	6	20%	1	10%
Doubled-up (together)	5	17%	0	0%
Not doubled up	19	63%	8	80%
<b>Living arrangement, current</b>				
Doubled-up (host)	13	43%	1	10%
Doubled-up (guest)	3	10%	0	0%
Doubled-up (together)	1	3%	0	0%
Not doubled up	13	43%	9	90%
Total respondents	30	100%	10	100%

<sup>20</sup> Translated from Spanish.

"She left me in charge of the apartment, and just a little while ago, I put it in my name."<sup>21</sup> With the additional space, Lisa decided to rent the apartment's second bedroom to another single mother. As hosts left shared living arrangements, guests like Lisa had the opportunity to stay on in their apartment and to become hosts themselves. Other undocumented renters—like Claudia, introduced above—found opportunities to rent their own apartment through managers who waived certain entry requirements, allowing them to leave guest living arrangements. Both transitions gave renters the opportunity to host others.

Most respondents found hosting opportunities through their social networks, and they lived with friends, family members, or acquaintances who also faced challenges on the rental market. Cynthia's (Guatemalan, undocumented, low-income) experience hosting others exemplifies this trend. Over the years, she has lived with different members of her family who also immigrated to the United States from their hometown in Guatemala—most recently, her younger sister and her sister's children. Hosts anticipate that guests in shared homes will contribute to rent, help pay bills, and perform household chores. Cynthia explained how she and her husband arrived at these expectations: "She helped us out with the bills, since she had a job. My husband was saying, 'If she doesn't have a job, how could we ask, but since she does have one, we asked her to help out a little.'"<sup>22</sup> A minority of renters looked for roommates outside of their immediate networks to help them cover housing costs. For instance, after Juana (Mexican, undocumented, low-income) moved to North Hollywood with her two elementary-aged children, she sought out another single mother to help her split the costs of her apartment. She posted an ad for a room rental on Facebook Marketplace, with the condition that her roommate "would be a single mom, a single woman, because I understand what it's like."<sup>23</sup>

When renters doubled up as hosts, they screened potential roommates and established household guidelines. When I asked one undocumented, Mexican renter to describe the rules of her arrangement with a woman who rented her second bedroom for two years, she replied: "Well, we told her, 'You can't arrive after this time, you can't bring boyfriends, you can't bring girlfriends. Why? Because we're a family with certain rules.' And under those conditions, she agreed to live here."<sup>24</sup> In contrast to doubled-up guests, doubled-up hosts generally did not move when disagreements arose and went unresolved. For example, Leticia's (Mexican, undocumented, low-income) adult daughter's friend rented a bedroom in Leticia's apartment for several months until Leticia asked her to leave. I asked her to tell me why the arrangement had not worked out: "I think she wanted more freedom... she didn't like my rules and so she went off on her own."<sup>25</sup> By hosting others, renters receive the benefits of doubling up (e.g., reducing housing costs) while also mitigating one of the main reasons why these arrangements can be unstable (e.g., restricted autonomy, or being told by the primary leaseholder to move out). Although an undocumented legal status limits access to shelter, undocumented/mixed-status families achieved greater housing security over time by moving out of guest living arrangements and into homes where they hosted others.

## DISCUSSION

Prior research has shown how housing searches stratify U.S. citizen renters by household income and race/ethnicity. With several exceptions (see [Asad and Rosen 2019](#); [Carillo et al. 2016](#)), less is known about how renters' legal status influences residential decision-making and stratifies access to shelter. Because housing plays a central role in the intergenerational transmission of disadvantage, restricted housing opportunities are consequential for the upward mobility of immigrant Latino renters and their children.

This article addresses this gap by comparing the housing searches of 30 Mexican, Central American, and South American undocumented/mixed-status families and 10 predominantly Mexican, U.S.

<sup>21</sup> Translated from Spanish. Lisa's management company initially did not want to transfer the lease, but she appealed by collecting letters of support from each of her neighbors.

<sup>22</sup> Translated from Spanish.

<sup>23</sup> Translated from Spanish.

<sup>24</sup> Translated from Spanish.

<sup>25</sup> Translated from Spanish.

citizen/LPR families with comparable incomes. Both citizen and undocumented families moved for similar, reactive reasons (DeLuca et al. 2019). Despite similarities in why families moved, the process of finding a new home was more challenging for undocumented movers. Laws regulating tenant screening created additional obstacles for undocumented households. In Los Angeles, landlords frequently request an SSN from each adult applicant to conduct a credit/background check and verify household incomes using bank statements, pay stubs, and tax returns. Although undocumented and citizen respondents in this study held similar incomes, work and pay were often irregular, informal, and cash-based for undocumented earners. Other undocumented renters reported additional resource constraints related to their legal status, lowering the disposable income that they could spend on housing. These exclusions from the U.S. financial institutions, the formal labor market, and the social safety net accumulated to create long and uncertain housing searches for the undocumented renters interviewed in this study, who often spent months searching for a new home.

These obstacles influenced how undocumented and mixed-status families approached rental applications compared to citizen movers. Despite holding low or damaged credit, low-income citizens submitted applications to apartments that seemed viable and were within their price range. In contrast, undocumented renters' credit illegibility, past experiences with tenant screening, and conversations with building managers discouraged them from submitting applications to units that requested an SSN. As rental applications can cost between \$70 and \$100 per couple, families were hesitant to apply to units where it was likely that they would be rejected. In light of these screening practices, undocumented renters searched for sympathetic managers or bypassed formal tenant screenings altogether by doubling up with other households. Despite these barriers, undocumented families achieved greater housing security over time by transitioning from doubled-up guest living arrangements to homes where they hosted others.

These findings advance research on rental housing searches, Latino immigrant housing careers in the United States, and the punitive consequences of illegality within families. First, though most prior work on residential mobility focuses on U.S. citizens (DeLuca et al. 2019; Desmond and Shollenberger 2015; Krysan and Crowder 2017; Reosti 2021), this article shows how renters' legal status operates as a subject position that also stratifies movers, primarily during the rental application stage of moves. Extending past work on the housing searches of Latino immigrants (Asad and Rosen 2019; Carrillo et al. 2016), I have shown how an undocumented legal status creates barriers during the tenant screening process that severely limit the housing opportunities available to undocumented and mixed-status families, channeling these renters to doubled-up homes. As the majority of undocumented immigrants are Latino (Passel and Cohn 2019), tenant screening practices that rely on SSNs and credit histories widen racial inequalities in rental housing access.

Second, these results advance our understanding of Latino immigrants' housing careers in the United States. I find that undocumented/mixed-status families achieved greater housing security over time by changing who they lived with and on what terms. As moving from guest to host reduces the insecurities associated with doubling up (Harvey 2022), this transition represents a consequential housing change for immigrant families, even before they purchase a home (Díaz McConnell 2015a; Díaz McConnell and Marcelli 2007). Identifying how undocumented renters use doubling up to work around exclusionary tenant screening practices also explains how and why undocumented immigrants come to live in crowded homes (Díaz McConnell 2015b; Hall and Greenman 2013). Though doubling up can provide emotional and financial support (Ahrentzen 2003), household crowding has negative consequences for adult and child wellbeing (Evans et al. 2003; Solari and Mare 2012). Given the links between crowding and COVID-19 case rates (Hwang and Shrimali 2022), it is also plausible that restrictive rental application requirements contributed, in part, to the early spread of COVID-19 within immigrant communities, compounding the vulnerabilities that Latino immigrants simultaneously faced in the workplace during the pandemic (Riley et al. 2021). Taken together, these findings advance research on Latino immigrant housing careers and help explain how and why an undocumented legal status is associated with disadvantaged indoor living environments.

Finally, this article extends past work on immigrant illegality (De Genova 2002; Menjívar and Abrego 2012) and multigenerational punishment (Enriquez 2015). Past work on multigenerational punishment focuses on the spillover consequences of an undocumented legal status on citizen children through managing deportation threats, increased anxiety and emotional distress, and reduced

family resources (Enriquez 2015). Yet housing conditions, living arrangements, and access to shelter are also critical to child wellbeing (Harvey 2020; Rugh 2021; Solari and Mare 2012). By showing how tenant screening practices limit housing options and channel undocumented renters and their children to crowded homes, this study identifies another way that multigenerational punishment occurs within immigrant families. Though renters worked hard to house their children, structural barriers imposed by their legal status meant that their housing options were severely constrained. The findings suggest that an undocumented legal status circumscribes immigrant renters' access to shelter, in addition to punishments experienced in the labor market, education system, and through family separation (Dreby 2012; Hall et al. 2010; Menjívar and Abrego 2012).

### Project Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Approximately half of these interviews were conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Though most families had moved prior to the pandemic, and no renters reported that they had changed living arrangements due to COVID-19, the pandemic impacted immigrant renters' housing experiences in several ways. First, LA County enacted an eviction moratorium that prevented legal evictions due to pandemic-related financial hardship and unauthorized occupancies (i.e., informal rentals). Second, the state of California included undocumented and mixed-status renters in statewide relief programs, including rent relief (though these families were excluded from unemployment benefits). It is likely that the context of reception in Los Angeles shielded respondents from experiencing higher levels of housing insecurity compared to undocumented renters in other places. Additional work could examine how renter protections varied across the country during the pandemic and prompted different levels of housing insecurity for undocumented renters.

These results also signal the need for additional research that disaggregates the experiences of doubled-up households based on the relationships between householders. Respondents in this study rented spaces as guests in homes with family members, workplace acquaintances, and strangers. It is likely that the nature of the relationship between householders shaped intrahousehold dynamics and expectations for instrumental exchanges and emotional support. Exploring how various doubled-up living arrangements shape household stability and intrahousehold support can advance our understanding of the heterogenous consequences of doubling up for families.

Finally, future work could explicitly adopt an intersectional approach to theorizing access to rental housing for immigrants. In this study, property managers held a substantial amount of discretion when encouraging (or discouraging) renters from submitting applications and when enforcing entry requirements. Future research could examine how immigrant renters' racial identity, gender, parental status, and legal status all jointly influence property managers' decision-making and stratify access to safe and stable shelter. Though this study predominantly focuses on the experiences of Mexican and Central American renters, research with other Latin American origin immigrants (e.g., Dominican renters, Cuban renters, etc.) could shed light on how rental housing access varies across these groups and contributes to divergent incorporation pathways in different immigrant destinations. It is also possible that undocumented renters in emerging immigrant destinations may find fewer property managers who speak Spanish, are immigrants themselves, or who are flexible with rental application requirements. How immigrants' access to rental housing varies across geography remains an under-studied dimension of the context of reception in the United States.

## CONCLUSION

Echoing recent work on the stratifying consequences of credit and background checks during moves (Reosti 2021), these findings highlight the urgency of creating policy alternatives to contemporary tenant screening practices. Though conversations around Fair Chance housing typically focus on renters who hold criminal records, the present study can motivate additional protections for immigrant families, and it positions equal access to rental housing as an immigrant justice issue. In the absence of the legal protections provided by U.S. citizenship, potential policy interventions—including limiting security deposit amounts, soliciting ITINs or SSNs on rental applications, or permitting renters to cover the total cost of deposits over an extended period—could better support immigrant families during moves. Such practices already occur in Los Angeles, albeit at the discretion of

individual landlords and building managers. Nonetheless, these findings also underscore the limitations of policy changes to tenant screening practices in the absence of comprehensive efforts to regularize renters' immigration status. An undocumented legal status creates cascading challenges during housing searches that make moves, in the words of one respondent, "doubly difficult." As long as undocumented immigrants are also excluded from the formal labor market, social safety net, and U.S. financial institutions, their housing options will be limited compared to those of citizen renters.

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