

Double Disadvantage: Unauthorized Mexicans in the U.S. Labor Market

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From 1988 to 2008, the United States' undocumented population grew from 2 million to 12 million persons. It has since stabilized at around 11 million, a majority of whom are Mexican. As of this writing, some 60 percent of all Mexican immigrants in the United States are in the country illegally. This article analyzes the effect of being undocumented on sector of employment and wages earned in the United States. We show that illegal migrants are disproportionately channeled into the secondary labor market, where they experience a double disadvantage, earning systematically lower wages by virtue of working in the secondary sector and receiving an additional economic penalty because they are undocumented. Mexican immigrants, in particular, experienced a substantial decline in real wages between 1970 and 2010 attributable to their rising share of undocumented migrants in U.S. labor markets during a time when undocumented hiring was criminalized.

Keywords: undocumented migrants; illegal migration; Mexican immigrants; wages; labor markets

The current era of Mexican migration to the United States began in 1942 when the U.S. government approached authorities in Mexico to propose a binational agreement known as the Bracero Accord. Faced with labor shortages because of war mobilization and the initiation of a military draft, U.S. officials sought to arrange for the yearly importation of Mexican laborers on temporary visas for seasonal work

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north of the border. Although originally envisioned as a temporary wartime measure, tight labor markets persisted in the postwar years and prompted the U.S. Congress to extend and expand the program. During the late 1950s, some 450,000 Bracero migrants were entering the United States each year, along with about 50,000 legal permanent residents who were not, at that point, subject to numerical limitation (Massey, Durand, and Malone 2002).

During the 1960s, however, Congress began to scale back the Bracero program, and at the end of 1964 Congress let it expire despite Mexican government protests. In the following year, Congress amended U.S. immigration law to apply numerical limits on permanent immigration from the Western Hemisphere for the first time. Legislation steadily tightened these restrictions until 1976, when immigration from the Americas was capped at twenty thousand persons per country per year. The cancellation of the Bracero Accord and these restrictive changes to U.S. immigration law were enacted as civil rights reforms—abandoning discriminatory quotas enacted in the 1920s against Southern and Eastern Europeans while ending prohibitions on immigration from Asia and Africa and eliminating what had come to be seen as an exploitive labor program. Little thought was given to what would happen to the annual inflow of half a million Mexicans when access to legal visas was suddenly curtailed (Massey and Pren 2012b).

What happened, of course, was the continuation of migration, but it was largely undocumented. By the late 1970s, the annual migratory flows of the late 1950s had essentially been reestablished, only this time the migrants were “illegal aliens” rather than legally authorized workers. Since the migrants were “illegal,” they were by definition “criminals” and “lawbreakers” and, thus, could be readily portrayed as a grave threat to the nation by immigration bureaucrats eager to increase agency budgets and cynical politicians seeking to mobilize voters for political purposes (Massey and Pren 2012a). The resulting “Latino Threat Narrative” framed Mexican immigration either as a “rising tide” that threatened to “flood” the United States and “drown its culture,” or as an “alien invasion” in which “outgunned” border patrol officers valiantly sought to “hold the line” against “banzai charges” of Mexicans seeking to “reconquer” the United States (Chavez 2001, 2008; Santa Ana 2002).

Over time, this narrative gave rise to a new politics of immigration restriction and border enforcement that brought about the progressive militarization of the Mexico-U.S. border (Dunn 1996; Nevins 2001). Between 1986 and 2010, the budget of the U.S. Border Patrol increased by a factor of twelve in real terms and the number of officers increased by a factor of almost six, even though the volume of inflow had stabilized by around 1979 (Massey, Durand, and Pren 2016). Prior to 1986, undocumented Mexican migration to the United States was overwhelmingly circular, with 85 percent of entries between 1965 and 1985 being offset by departures (Massey and Singer 1995). The militarization of the border,

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however, sharply increased the costs and risks of unauthorized border crossing, and in response, migrants minimized border crossing, not by remaining in Mexico in the first place, but by staying in the United States once they had achieved entry (Massey, Durand, and Pren 2015).

In the end, the strategy of border enforcement backfired by reducing the volume of undocumented out-migration while having no effect at all on the volume of unauthorized in-migration (Massey, Durand, and Pren 2016). From 1988 to 2008, the size of the undocumented population rose from 2 million to 12 million. Although the undocumented population fell by around a million persons between 2008 and 2009 in the wake of the Great Recession, since then it has stabilized at around 11 million (Passel, Lopez, and Cohn 2014). Not since the days of slavery have so many residents of the United States lacked any social, economic, or political rights and enjoyed so few legal protections (Massey 2013).

Prior to 1986, undocumented status had no significant effect on the wages earned by Mexican migrants in the U.S. labor market (Massey 1987). In that year, however, the Immigration Reform and Control Act criminalized the hiring of undocumented workers, and in this context the growing population of unauthorized migrants created a pool of exploitable workers that put downward pressure on the wages of all immigrants, but especially those without documents (Donato and Massey 1993; Phillips and Massey 1999; Donato and Sisk 2013; Massey and Gentsch 2014). Here we demonstrate how undocumented workers continue to be doubly disadvantaged in the United States. Not only are they selected into the most disadvantaged sector of the labor market but, whatever sector they work in, they earn lower wages than other migrants.

Modeling Undocumented Employment and Earnings

Following Massey et al. (1998), we combine the theoretical perspectives of Piore (1979) and Portes (1987) to define a labor market structure of three sectors: a primary sector characterized by formal employment in “good” jobs, a secondary sector defined by informal employment in “bad” jobs, and an enclave sector of people employed by immigrant entrepreneurs. According to Piore, capital is a fixed factor of production that can be idled by lower demand but not laid off, meaning that business owners bear the costs of its unemployment. In contrast, labor is a variable factor of production that can be released when demand falls, forcing workers to bear the cost of their unemployment. For this reason, whenever possible owners employ capital-intensive methods to meet the stable, reliable portion of demand and labor-intensive methods to accommodate the seasonal, fluctuating component of demand, thereby creating two classes of jobs: one characterized by regular employment at high wages and another characterized by unstable employment and low wages. Here we operationally define *secondary sector employment* as working for a non-Mexican employer and being paid cash with no taxes withheld.

Portes (1987) expanded segmented labor market theory by hypothesizing a third sector of employment consisting of immigrant-owned or managed businesses that are interconnected with one another and rely mainly on other

immigrants as workers. Within the enclave, common social origins and cultural values create solidarity and trust that rewards migrant workers for their efforts and loyalty, over time yielding opportunities for economic mobility and earnings (Portes and Bach 1987). We operationally define *enclave employment* as working in a business owned or managed by a Mexican, whatever the terms of employment. These definitions of the secondary and enclave sectors leave *primary sector employment* as the reference category, implicitly defining it as working for a non-Mexican employer in a job paid by check and subject to tax withholdings.

Our leading hypothesis is that migrants without legal status will be disproportionately channeled away from primary sector employment into secondary sector jobs and that in whatever jobs they hold, undocumented migrants will earn less money. We define legal status in terms of three categories. *Legal immigrants* serve as the reference category and include naturalized U.S. citizens and persons holding legal permanent residence in the United States. *Undocumented migrants* include persons who entered the country without authorization or who entered on a tourist visa and subsequently violated its terms by taking paid employment. *Temporary migrants* are those who entered with a temporary work visa that authorized work for a specific employer while in the United States for a set period of time. We argue that temporary legal workers will be channeled away from the enclave sector because of the restrictive terms of their temporary work visas. We expect to observe lower earnings in secondary sector jobs compared with primary sector jobs, but we predict that earnings in the enclave sector will approximate those in the primary sector. As already noted, whatever their sector of employment, we expect undocumented migrants to experience lower earnings because of their vulnerable status and poor bargaining position.

We measure earnings in terms of real hourly wages defined in 2010 inflation-adjusted dollars. While examining the effect of legal status on sector of employment and wages, we control for a variety of independent variables, including indicators of demographic background (gender, age, marital status), human capital (education, occupational skill, U.S. experience, and English language ability), social capital (connection to a migrant parent or sibling and the prevalence of U.S. migration in the origin community), how the job was obtained (by oneself or through a relative, acquaintance, or contractor), and degree of integration within U.S. society (whether the migrant reported having social relations with Anglo-Americans or holding a formal bank account).

Data and Methods

Our data come from the Mexican Migration Project (MMP [MMP154 database]) compiled from random surveys conducted between 1982 and 2015 in 154 communities located in twenty-three states throughout Mexico. Each year, four to six communities were purposively selected to increase the geographic coverage, socioeconomic diversity, and demographic range of the dataset. Dwellings within the selected communities were then enumerated to create a sampling frame from which households were randomly selected for a personal interview using a semistructured questionnaire. In the course of an ethnographically informed

conversation, interviewers gathered basic information about the household head, spouse, all children of the head, and any other household residents to compile basic demographic, social, and economic information about each person along with information about that person's first and most recent trip to the United States. Household heads and spouses additionally provided life histories that included a complete history of migration and border crossing; household heads also answered a series of detailed questions about their most recent U.S. trip. The accuracy, reliability, and validity of the MMP data have been validated by direct comparisons with data from nationally representative samples (Massey and Zenteno 2000; Massey and Capoferro 2004).

Our working dataset includes 5,564 household heads, each of whom provided information on jobs held in the United States from 1970 through 2010. Table 1 presents means and standard deviations for independent and dependent variables included in the analysis. As can be seen, the average migrant earned \$10.21 per hour in constant 2010 dollars, and in rough terms around 60 percent held jobs in the primary sector and 20 percent each held jobs in the enclave and secondary sectors. Nearly three-quarter of the migrants were undocumented; whereas 21 percent were U.S. citizens or legal permanent residents; and just 3 percent held temporary work visas, though the relative frequency of legal temporary visas has risen dramatically in recent years (Massey, Durand, and Pren 2015). Males composed 95 percent of all respondents with an average age of about 33 years, though only 36 percent were married or in a union at the time of the last trip.

As one might expect, the migrants generally came from modest socioeconomic backgrounds, with average schooling of just 6.2 years, a quarter working in agriculture, and nearly two-thirds being unskilled manual laborers. The average migrant had made some 2.5 prior trips to the United States and at the time of the most recent visit had accumulated an average of 77 months of U.S. experience. Only 27 percent said they spoke and understood English well, though 37 percent said they did speak and understand some English; about a third reported no English ability at all. Some 19 percent of respondents reported having a parent with U.S. experience, and 39 percent said they had a sibling who had been to the United States. In the typical community, around 22 percent of all persons aged 15 and older had been to the United States at the time of the most recent U.S. trip. Most respondents obtained their job either through a relative (31 percent) or an acquaintance (28 percent), but relatively few obtained work through a labor contractor (just 0.9 percent). The typical migrant was not very well integrated into the United States, with only 35 percent reporting a social relationship with an Anglo-American and just 16 percent holding a bank account. Most of the U.S. trips took place between 1980 and 2004, with the greatest concentration (22 percent) occurring between 1990 and 1994.

Legal Status, Employment, and Wages

Table 2 presents a multinomial logit model estimated to predict sector of employment for migrants in the MMP154 dataset. As shown in the top panel of the table, holding a temporary work visa has a strong negative effect on the likelihood

TABLE 1
Means and Standard Deviations of Variables Used in the Analysis
of Unauthorized Mexicans in the U.S. Labor Force

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
Earnings		
Hourly wage (2010 dollars)	10.21	5.62
Sector of employment		
Primary	0.599	0.599
Secondary	0.199	0.399
Enclave	0.202	0.401
Documentation		
Legal resident or citizen	0.207	0.405
Temporary work visa	0.034	0.181
Undocumented	0.740	0.439
Demographic background		
Female	0.052	0.223
Age at last trip	33.17	11.95
Married or union	0.362	0.481
Education		
School years completed	6.175	3.958
Occupation		
Agriculture	0.248	0.432
Unskilled	0.653	0.476
Skilled	0.041	0.198
U.S. experience		
Number of prior U.S. trips	2.491	4.902
Months of U.S. experience	77.05	86.73
English ability		
Does not speak or understand English	0.335	0.472
Speaks and understands some English	0.368	0.482
Speaks and understands much English	0.271	0.445
Social capital		
Parent a migrant	0.192	0.394
Sibling a migrant	0.386	0.487
Community migration prevalence	22.45	14.54
How job obtained		
By oneself	0.260	0.439
Relative	0.311	0.463
Acquaintance	0.284	0.451
Contractor	0.009	0.092
Integration		
Has relations with Anglos	0.349	0.477
Has bank account	0.159	0.366

(continued)

TABLE 1 (CONTINUED)

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
Period		
1970–1974	0.061	0.240
1975–1979	0.094	0.292
1980–1984	0.106	0.308
1985–1989	0.175	0.380
990–1994	0.222	0.416
1995–1999	0.177	0.382
2000–2004	0.114	0.317
2005–2010	0.051	0.219

of enclave employment, an effect that occurs because temporary visas are tied to specific employers. People holding such a visa are only around 60 percent as likely to work in the enclave sector compared with legal immigrants (determined by computing $\exp[-0.506] = 0.603$). Consistent with our leading hypothesis, being undocumented strongly predicts the likelihood of working in the secondary sector. Indeed, lacking legal papers increases the odds of secondary sector employment by a factor of 2.3 (determined by computing $\exp[0.817] = 2.264$). Thus, legal status plays a key role in channeling migrants into distinct sectors of the labor market.

Turning to other variables in the model, we see that sector of employment is not affected by a migrant's demographic characteristics, education, or period of migration, though there is some indication of a decline in the likelihood of secondary sector employment after the year 2000. With respect to occupation status, unskilled manual workers are only 78 percent as likely to work in the enclave sector but are 95 percent more likely to work in the secondary sector compared to agricultural workers. Being a skilled worker likewise increases the odds of working in the secondary sector by 90 percent. With each prior trip to the United States, the likelihood of employment in the enclave sector rises by around 3.6 percent. In contrast, each additional month of prior U.S. experience lowers the likelihood of enclave employment by around 0.2 percent and reduces the odds of working in the secondary sector by 0.5 percent. In general, English language ability lowers the likelihood of enclave employment and increases the probability of employment in the secondary sector. Thus, speaking and understanding much English reduces the odds of enclave employment by 29 percent and increases the odds of secondary sector employment by 20 percent.

In terms of social capital, as the prevalence of migration in the origin community rises, the odds of enclave employment increase by around 1.2 percent, while the odds of secondary sector employment decrease by 1.4 percent. In contrast, having a migrant sibling decreases the odds of enclave employment by 99 percent but increases the odds of secondary sector employment by a factor of 2.2. In addition, obtaining a job through a relative increases the odds of enclave

TABLE 2
 Multinomial Logit Model Predicting Sector of Employment
 for Mexican Migrants to the United States

Variable	Sector=Enclave		Sector=Secondary	
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>
Documentation				
Legal	—	—	—	—
Temporary	-0.506***	0.214	0.228	0.277
Undocumented	-0.143	0.129	0.817*****	0.127
Demographic Background				
Female	-0.093	0.237	0.351	0.223
Age	0.011	0.018	-0.001	0.016
Age squared	0.000	0.001	0.000	0.000
Married or in union	0.105	0.188	0.069	0.185
Education				
School years completed	-0.014	0.012	-0.017	0.011
Occupation				
Agriculture	—	—	—	—
Unskilled	-0.244***	0.093	0.667*****	0.090
Skilled	-0.351	0.219	0.641***	0.208
U.S. experience				
Number of prior U.S. trips	0.035***	0.015	0.010	0.012
Total months of U.S. experience	-0.002***	0.001	-0.005*****	0.001
English ability				
Does not speak or understand English	—	—	—	—
Speaks and understands some English	-0.099	0.095	0.331*****	0.092
Speaks and understands much English	-0.346***	0.122	0.185°	0.113
Social capital				
Parent a migrant	0.057	0.136	-0.125	0.100
Sibling a migrant	-7.152*****	1.005	0.768*****	0.103
Community migration prevalence	0.012*****	0.003	-0.014*****	0.003
How job obtained				
By oneself	—	—	—	—
Relative	0.478*****	0.096	0.046	0.089
Acquaintance	0.200***	0.100	0.000	0.089
Contractor	0.301	0.402	0.550	0.352
Integration				
Relations with Anglos	-0.162°	0.099	-0.092	0.081
Bank account	-0.224**	0.129	-1.102*****	0.157
Period				
1970–1974	—	—	—	—
1975–1979	-0.015	0.233	-0.163	0.179
1980–1984	0.291	0.225	-0.266	0.179

(continued)

TABLE 2 (CONTINUED)

Variable	Sector=Enclave		Sector=Secondary	
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>
1985–1989	0.240	0.214	0.065	0.166
1990–1994	0.122	0.213	0.028	0.163
1995–1999	0.184	0.206	–0.167	0.177
2000–2004	0.288	0.212	–0.424***	0.201
2005–2010	0.386	0.241	–0.392	0.259
Intercept	–0.661	0.435	–1.766****	0.403
Likelihood ratio	1,921.68****			
Wald score	588.021****			
Observations	5,564			

* $p < .10$. ** $p < .10$. *** $p < .05$. **** $p < .001$.

employment by 61 percent, whereas becoming employed through an acquaintance increases the odds of working in the enclave sector by 22 percent. Finally, greater integration within U.S. society generally reduces the likelihood of employment in both the enclave and the secondary sectors. Having a bank account reduces the odds of enclave employment by around 20 percent and lowers the odds of secondary sector employment by 67 percent.

Table 3 presents an ordinary least squares regression of the natural log of the real hourly wage on sector of employment, legal status, and other independent variables. In a logged wage regression, coefficients indicate the percentage increase or decrease in wages associated with a unit change in the variable in question. As shown in the top panel, working in the secondary sector is associated with a 12.5 percent reduction in real wages while being undocumented reduces them by another 11.5 percent. Thus undocumented migrants are doubly disadvantaged, first because their lack of legal papers raises the odds of secondary sector employment, which itself carries a 12.5 percent wage penalty; and second by lowering wages directly by another 11.5 percent whatever sector they work in. Within the secondary sector, respondents to the MMP report stiff competition from undocumented Central Americans, who continue to arrive in significant numbers; and a relative saturation of local labor markets, which drives down wages and undermines working conditions.

As is typical in earnings regressions, wages vary in curvilinear fashion with respect to age (rising up to age 29 and declining thereafter) and are 18 percent lower for women. Each year of education increases real wages by 1.1 percent, and holding an unskilled manual job carries an 11.5 percent wage premium compared to an agricultural occupation, whereas holding a skilled job boosts wages by 23.1 percent. Wages rise by 0.6 percent with each additional prior trip and are 4.8 percent greater for those who speak and understand some English and 8.8 percent greater for those who speak and understand a lot of English. Each

TABLE 3
OLS Regression of Logged Wages on Selected Independent Variables

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>
Sector of employment		
Enclave	-0.022	0.020
Secondary	-0.125****	0.018
Documentation		
Legal	—	—
Temporary	-0.114***	0.045
Undocumented	-0.115****	0.021
Demographic background		
Female	-0.180****	0.044
Age	0.011***	0.003
Age squared	-0.0002****	0.000
Married or in union	0.033	0.032
Education		
School years completed	0.011****	0.002
Occupation		
Agriculture	—	—
Unskilled	0.115****	0.017
Skilled	0.231****	0.037
U.S. Experience		
Number of prior U.S. trips	0.006***	0.002
Total months of U.S. experience	0.000	0.000
English ability		
Does not speak or understand English	—	—
Speaks and understands some English	0.048***	0.018
Speaks and understands much English	0.088****	0.021
Social capital		
Parent a migrant	0.019	0.018
Sibling migrated	-0.107****	0.020
Community migration prevalence	0.002***	0.001
How job obtained		
By oneself	—	—
Relative	-0.013	0.017
Acquaintance	-0.013	0.017
Contractor	0.045	0.073
Integration		
Relations with Anglos	0.005	0.015
Bank account	0.180****	0.022
Period		
1970–1974	—	—
1975–1979	-0.127****	0.036

(continued)

TABLE 3 (CONTINUED)

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>
1980–1984	−0.219 ^{****}	0.035
1985–1989	−0.295 ^{****}	0.033
1990–1994	−0.348 ^{****}	0.033
1995–1999	−0.375 ^{****}	0.035
2000–2004	−0.300 ^{****}	0.039
2005–2010	−0.400 ^{****}	0.048
Intercept	2.221 ^{****}	0.079
Adjusted <i>R</i> -squared	0.184	
Number of observations	4,146	

[°]*p* = .10. ^{**}*p* < .10. ^{***}*p* < .05. ^{****}*p* < .001.

point increase in the prevalence of migration in the origin community raises wages by 0.2 percent, whereas having a migrant sibling is associated with a 10.7 percent wage reduction. In contrast, having a U.S. bank account is associated with an 18 percent wage premium. A particularly noteworthy result is the progressive decline in the real value of wages over time for all immigrants, which according to Massey and Gentsch (2014) reflects the downward pressure on wages that stems from a rising share of undocumented workers in labor markets where undocumented hiring is criminalized.

Summary and Conclusion

During the Second World War the United States negotiated a binational treaty known as the Bracero Accord to bring Mexican workers into the United States on temporary visas for short-term work. The program grew to sustain around 450,000 annual entries by the late 1950s. At this time legal permanent immigration was not restricted numerically, and around 50,000 additional permanent immigrants entered each year. In 1965, however, the U.S. Congress chose not to renew the Bracero Accord and imposed the first-ever numerical limits on immigration from the Americas. The drastic reduction of opportunities for legal entry did not end large-scale migration from Mexico to the United States, however. Instead, the flows continued and reestablished themselves under undocumented auspices.

The rise of “illegal” migration, in turn, created a new “Latino Threat Narrative” in public discourse that after 1986 led to an unprecedented militarization of the Mexico-U.S. border. Prior to this time, undocumented migration had been overwhelmingly circular; but the rising costs and risks of undocumented border crossing increasingly induced migrants to cease moving back and forth, and rates of return migration to Mexico fell sharply. However, because rates of undocumented in-migration were unaffected by the militarization of the border, the net

volume of undocumented entries increased and the unauthorized population grew rapidly. Since 2008, the number of undocumented residents has stabilized at around 11 million persons. Here we documented the labor market consequences of persistent undocumented status for this large, disenfranchised population.

Our results confirm earlier studies, documenting a steady decline in the wages of all Mexicans working in the United States over time, as well as the significant penalty paid by migrant workers who lack full legal status. In addition to the general decline in wages for Mexican immigrants, we found undocumented migrants to be doubly disadvantaged, being channeled into the secondary labor market where wages are systematically lower than in the primary sector, and then earning lower wages than documented migrants regardless of sector of employment. In addition, we found migrants holding temporary work visas were also significantly disadvantaged. Rather than being channeled away into the secondary sector, however, they were channeled away from employment in immigrant enclaves, a sector of the labor market in which greater opportunities prevailed and wages roughly equaled those in the primary sector; but like undocumented migrants, they earned lower wages in whatever sector they worked.

In sum, this empirical analysis clearly demonstrates the disadvantaged position of Mexican immigrants, in general, and undocumented Mexicans, in particular, within the U.S. labor market and highlights the importance of legal status in determining economic welfare in the United States. Undocumented migrants were more than twice as likely as legal immigrants to work in the secondary sector, where wages were 12.5 percent lower than in the primary or enclave sector. Evaluated at the mean wage of \$10.21 per hour, this wage penalty yields an annual deficit of \$2,655 for a full-time, year-round worker (i.e., 40 hours per week, 52 weeks a year). Holding sector of employment constant, moreover, undocumented migrants earn 11.5 percent less per hour than legal immigrants, resulting in an annual deficit of \$2,442. For those migrants who were unfortunate enough to be channeled into the secondary sector (49 percent of those without documents, on average, according to model predictions), the total loss of annual income would be \$5,097, out of a base income of \$21,237 working at the mean wage.

Millions of undocumented Mexicans currently working in the U.S. labor force therefore earn systematically less than they otherwise would if they were fully documented, inevitably depressing the earnings of households to which they belong, which increasingly contain U.S.-born (citizen) children. According to Passel and Taylor (2010), in 2009, the children of undocumented migrants living in the United States included 4 million U.S. citizens who, because of the undocumented wage penalty, could not have received the same level of parental investment as their counterparts with documented parents. If each of these children had an undocumented parent working full time at the average wage, the total disinvestment would equal \$9.8 billion. Very clearly, then, the economic penalty associated with a lack of legal status not only constitutes a burden for currently undocumented adults but carries the very real risk of perpetuating poverty and disadvantage over time and into the next generation of American citizens.

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