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Life course illegality: how the life course and aging shape the experience of illegality

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Scholars have studied in detail how immigrants experience illegality in the US. Many have focused on immigrants' fear of deportation as central to this experience. Their findings center on children, young adults, and working-age adults, ignoring the fastest-growing population of undocumented immigrants, those over 50. This article uses a life course approach to examine how the fear of deportation shifts in late adulthood and introduces a new conceptual model, *life course illegality* (LCI), to understand the change. First, this LCI model bridges past research on migrant illegality—with a focus on deportability—and ecological-based and age-stratified life course approaches to offer new understandings of how deportation fears shape lived experiences. Then, through semi-structured interviews with older undocumented immigrants, I identify three key mechanisms that shape the shifts in fear of deportation in late adulthood: embodiment of illegality, life transitions, and temporal morality with culturally defined age norms. These valuable insights reveal the complex dynamics of the fear of deportation. Ultimately, I argue that fear of deportation and its consequences are a function of one's place in the life course and that the LCI model is best suited to understand these shifts.

Key words: migrant illegality; life course illegality; undocumented older immigrants.

Introduction

Elias Aguayo (58)[1] and I sat over coffee after the weather had prevented his employment for the day. He has lived and worked as a day laborer in the United States for 23 years. When we met in 2019, Trump was president, and immigrants' fear was high: as many as three-quarters of undocumented immigrants feared deportation (Asad 2020a). But when I asked Elias whether he was afraid, he responded, "No, I'm not scared at all." Some respondents volunteered that they had not always felt this way, and many had experience with deportation.[2] Yet, Elias conveyed sentiments shared by most older undocumented immigrants I interviewed. This conflicts with research in the last two decades that has demonstrated the centrality of fear of deportation to the experience of illegality, especially among undocumented immigrants. Such fear has real economic (Asad 2020b; Enriquez and Millán 2021), social (Armenta and Rosales 2019; Patler and Laster Pirtle 2018), and health consequences (Van Natta 2023; Martínez, Ruelas, and Granger 2018)

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for immigrant incorporation experiences. Given what we know in the literature, why does the fear of deportation in late adulthood differ?

I integrate past findings with a life course approach to build a model that better conceptualizes the experience of migrant illegality, in particular the fear of deportation. Past research has demonstrated how different individual-level, group-level, and geographical factors affect deportation fears, but it fails to contextualize the experience's dynamism across immigrants' lifetime. I propose the more comprehensive conceptual model *life course illegality* (LCI), which draws on ecological and age-stratified life course approaches. This model underscores how social environment, spatial location, social networks, and individual characteristics shape older undocumented immigrants' experiences. It also recognizes how time, transitions, and role changes influence the fear of deportation.

Drawing on past empirical research and a comprehensive analysis of 22 interviews with older undocumented immigrants in the East Bay area in California, I argue that fear of deportation is a function of where one is in the life course. This subset is part of a larger binational study involving 102 Mexican immigrants with varying immigration statuses living in the US (California) and Mexico (Jalisco). This population is considered vulnerable and hard to reach due to their precarious immigration status and age. The following sections review the literature, present the LCI model, and identify three mechanisms that mitigate older immigrants' fear of deportation: the embodiment of illegality, life transitions, and temporal morality. A discussion follows on how the LCI model advances understanding of the experience of illegality. The changes older undocumented immigrants experience have significant implications for their and their families' well-being and economic stability. They also provide insights into future experiences of younger undocumented immigrants as they age without pathways to legal permanent residency and citizenship.

Literature review

Experiences of illegality

A key theme in the literature on migrant illegality is immigrants' *experiences of illegality*. Initial research focused on how and why undocumented people were "living in the shadows" due to fear of deportation (Chavez 2013a). We know that "illegality is lived through the palpable sense of deportation" (De Genova 2002, 439). Fear of immigration enforcement causes individuals to avoid record-keeping institutions like the workplace, legal system, healthcare institutions, etc. (Asad 2020b). Workplaces become opportunities for surveillance through raids and the use of E-Verify to check employees' immigration status (Goldstein and Alonso-Bejarano 2017). Routine traffic stops and/or interactions with the criminal justice system have led to immigration-related sanctions (Valdivia 2019), as has racial profiling (Romero 2006). And immigrants express apprehension about accessing services, especially in rural areas (Gómez Cervantes and Menjívar 2020; Van Natta 2023). In sum, this research has focused on how and why fear of deportation has led undocumented immigrants toward *remaining invisible*.

Several studies have examined contexts where undocumented immigrants are less afraid of deportation. A study on immigrant and seasonal workers found that fear of deportation was not associated with avoidance of medical or dental care because these were "trusted" institutions (López-Cevallos, Lee, and Donlan 2014). In one study, undocumented young adults in California were less likely to fear deportability given their protective social and spatial locations, compared to groups in less protective locations, like their undocumented parents (Enriquez and Millán 2021). One of the few quantitative studies focusing on the fear of deportation among older adults found that those over 50 feared immigration enforcement less than younger immigrants (Rodriguez, Paredes, and Hagan 2017). This fear further decreased for those over 65 compared to 50–64-year-olds. However, we know less about *how* late adulthood shapes views on immigration enforcement and the mechanisms that lead to decreased fear.

However, a significant factor that may drive immigrants' fears—independent of their actual immigration/citizenship status—is racialization. US immigration enforcement practices and the

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stereotyping of "Latinos" or "Mexicans" as "undocumented" racializes illegality (Armenta 2017; Asad and Clair 2018). Such racialization focuses on skin color and phenotypic characteristics. For example, Diaz McConnell and Martinez (2024) find that Latino adults with darker skin tones expressed more concern about deportation during the Trump administration than the Biden administration. In earlier work, Patler (2014) found distinct experiences of illegality at schools where undocumented Latinx students reported more stereotype-based discrimination than undocumented Asian peers. Similarly, García (2017) found that immigrant and US-born Mexican-origin women in Houston, Texas, were racialized as "undocumented" in different institutional settings—workplace, criminal justice, education, and healthcare—creating a sense of exclusion. As Menjívar (2021) eloquently highlights, the racialization of illegality is situational, relational, dynamic, and historically/context-specific— it is not experienced the same way.

Other important research has focused on different aspects of the experience of illegality, like how undocumented immigrants find sources of income and deal with exploitative work conditions (Ordóñez 2015), secure identity documents like counselor IDs or driver's licenses (de Graauw 2014), and navigate basic services like healthcare, education, and banking (Van Natta 2023). However, this article focuses on one aspect of illegality, fear of deportation, because it has real economic, social, and health consequences for immigrant incorporation experiences. Economically, it can limit opportunities and wages, separate families, impact educational attainment, and foster unsafe work environments (Asad 2020a; Enriquez and Millán 2021). Socially, it can weaken immigrants' sense of belonging, limit participation in public spaces, foster distrust toward law enforcement, and influence how others view them (Armenta and Rosales 2019; Patler and Laster Pirtle 2018). Healthwise, it can impact mental and physical health as well as hinder the use of services (Van Natta 2023; Martínez et al. 2018).

A life course approach to fear of deportation

This paper considers how and why undocumented immigrants' experiences of deportability shift in late adulthood, drawing on life course theory, which "provides a framework for the study of changing lives in changing contexts" (Elder, Shanahan, and Jennings 2015, 9). It identifies four key factors: (1) historical *time and context* (time and place), (2) *life transitions and events* (timing of lives), (3) *"linked lives"* or how family members share experiences and follow trajectories that influence one another, and (4) *agency* or how individuals' choices and actions construct their own trajectories and social understandings.

First, I use an ecological life course understanding of historical time and context (Bronfenbrenner 1977, 1994). *Context* recognizes that immigrants' experiences of deportability are embedded in *biographical factors* (chronological age, gender, and race), *social networks* (family and friends), *spatial location* (like geographic place), and *social environment (*institutions, law, culture, the state) across their lives. Immigration work on earlier life stages has shown how the experience of deportability varies according to immigrants' temporal context (i.e., state-controlled time limits, waiting periods, administration) (Díaz McConnell and Martinez 2024; García, Diaz-Strong, and Rodriguez Rodriguez 2022) and geographic context (García 2014; Schmalzbauer 2014); social position like student/work status (Gleeson and Gonzales 2012; Jefferies 2014); parental status (Enriquez 2020); social class (Cebulko 2018); education, English proficiency, and occupation (Flores and Schachter 2018); sexuality (Cabas-Mijares 2023; Cisneros and Gutierrez 2018); and obtaining legal protection status (Enriquez and Millán 2021). Others point to how race—combined at times with class and age—makes Latino individuals, especially young, working-age men, particularly vulnerable to state scrutiny (Aranda and Vaquera 2015; García 2017; Golash-Boza and Hondagneu-Sotelo 2013) because they embody stereotypical characteristics of those "socially constructed" as undocumented (Flores and Schachter 2018). Given the influence that biographical factors, social networks, and social environment have, we imagine the experience of deportability to look different in late adulthood as older immigrants' contexts change.

Second, *life transitions and events* and the resulting ability to build on past experiences may make older immigrants more/less afraid of deportation. For example, research on earlier life

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stages, like adolescence, finds that many undocumented youths learn about and begin to fear the consequences of legal status disclosure to school officials (Jefferies 2014). More visible and vulnerable to immigration enforcement, they must show their immigration status to obtain driver's licenses, attend college, and apply for employment (Abrego 2006). Gonzales (2016) described this transition as "learning to be illegal." In *middle adulthood*, roughly 18–45 years of age, research shows how undocumented immigrants avoid authority figures like police, landlords, and social workers (Hacker 2017). They accept unsafe work environments (Fussell 2011; Harrison and Lloyd 2012), avoid joining labor unions (Gleeson 2010), worry about family separation (Dreby 2012), and sometimes avoid healthcare services (Hacker et al. 2015). In *late adulthood*, older immigrants experience transitions like leaving work, health changes, loss of driver's licenses, bereavement, and changing family roles that may impact their fears.

Third, the concept of *"linked lives"* implies that family relationships and responsibilities to one another influence older immigrants' fear of deportation since deportability threatens family members' well-being as well. Vast research has demonstrated how parental deportation negatively impacts immigrant children's well-being and financial stability (Dreby 2012; Lovato 2019). Past work has also shown how undocumented parents protect their minor children from their precarious status (Enriquez 2020; Philbin and Ayón 2016). As undocumented immigrants grow older, the direction of care work may shift as minor children become legal adults. For example, expectations that adult children care for aging parents can be threatened when adult children (or close family members) remain undocumented (Menjívar 2000). Older immigrants' inability to apply (and qualify) for traditional sources of support like Social Security and Medicare can strain relationships with their adult children (Ayón et al. 2023).

Finally, earlier events and current circumstances influence *individuals' choices* that shape their life trajectories. For example, fear of deportation is determined partly by one's past experiences living in the US and interacting with social institutions, and the longer they live in the US, the more experiences they have (Asad 2023). Research on undocumented populations has found that immigrants develop strategies for "social passing" (Gómez Cervantes 2021), "legal passing" (García 2019), and calculated [in]visibility (Villegas 2010). Drawing from this literature, I posit that those past experiences impact older immigrants' fear of deportation calculus in their current lives.

Methods

This study's data comes from 22 semi-structured interviews with undocumented Mexican immigrants in California's East Bay. Respondents include 10 women and 12 men between 50 and 70 years old. The mean age is 57. The average time in the US was 24 years. *Table 1* provides additional demographic characteristics. This is a subset of interviews from a larger binational study (102 interviews) on the experiences of immigrant aging for those remaining in the US as well as those returning to Mexico.[3] Immigrants as young as 50 are included for several reasons. First, large-scale data collection on older adults, like the Health and Retirement Survey and the Mexican Health and Aging Study, begin to survey older adults at age 50 to account for the onset of life transitions and health changes. Second, the immigrants in my study described 50 as a marker of "being old." Many had worked or were working in labor-intensive jobs that rapidly deteriorated their bodies and health.

All interviews occurred in the eastern part of California's East Bay between 2019 and 2022. California is well suited for studies on older immigrants and illegality because it is a traditional immigrant-receiving state and has the largest aging Mexican immigrant population with varying immigration statuses—including 663,000 undocumented immigrants over 45 (Center for Migration Studies 2019). Conditions in California represent a best-case scenario for the aging outcomes of older immigrants today.[4] The state has one of the most pro-immigrant social benefits systems in the country (National Immigration Law Center 2021).[5] Alameda County is also one of the few California counties that provide uninsured residents with affordable healthcare regardless of immigration status.[6] This is important given older immigrants' changing health needs.

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Table 1. Characteristics of undocumented older adults.

Description	Undocumented
N[a]	22
Age at time of interview	
Mean age	57
50–64 years	17
65 and over	5
Range	50 to 70
Gender	
Female	10
Male	12
Marital Status	
Single	4
Married	7
Divorced	2
Widow	4
Other	5
Children	
Mean number of children	3
No children	3
Have children	19
Years in the US	
Mean	24
Range	9 to 37
Working	
Yes	15
No	7
Household income[b]	
Less than $9999	4
$10,000–$19,999	10
$20,000–$39,999	5
$40,000 +	3

[a]During this study, two undocumented respondents recently adjusted their status to legal permanent residents. They are included here. [b]Includes monetary gifts from others (e.g., family members).

I used snowball sampling for recruitment. Older immigrants, especially the undocumented, are more difficult to reach than younger immigrants or children of immigrants. I thus participated in community events, church activities, and family festivities, volunteered with local organizations, and earned the trust of family and community members who vouched for me. Interviews were conducted in person in Spanish and averaged ~1.25 hours.[7] Conversations revolved around migration histories, family, work history, access to support, thoughts on immigration, return migration, and future plans. Following Small's (2009) case study approach (best suited to understand social processes or how and why questions), at around 20 interviews, I reached a saturation point where I no longer identified new mechanisms, so data collection ceased.

All interviews were digitally recorded for accuracy and transcribed verbatim. Full transcripts were analyzed in ATLAS.ti using inductive and deductive coding while data collection continued. I identified similarities and differences among older immigrants' experiences of legal status as I conducted and refined the interviews. The changing experience of illegality became a salient theme. Older undocumented immigrants kept saying their fear of enforcement was different. Subsequent interviews and coding paid closer attention to older immigrants' general fears. I identified situations where they felt *less* afraid of enforcement. Three mechanisms influencing immigrants' deportation fears emerged: the embodiment of aging, life transitions, and time in the

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US. Although not all respondents discussed all three, they were the most salient across interviews. Finally, I coded situations where immigrants remained fearful.

LCI in late adulthood: shifting fear of deportation

Life course illegality model

Undocumented immigrants' experiences of the fear of deportation shift with their changing social environment, spatial location, social networks, and individual characteristics across their lives. Life course theory identifies *within people change*, such as aging or human development. Immigrants' individual and group attributes impact their experience of illegality, and much work has identified factors that create diverging experiences *among people* like race, class, and gender (Lai, Hoffmann, and Waldinger 2023). However, in immigration research, we do not have a model to explain how these factors are connected across life stages. Social experiences do not occur in isolation, and some factors matter more or less for individual immigrants at different times. Using an *LCI* model that synthesizes insights on migrant illegality with a life course approach allows us to identify how transitions, events, and role changes across life stages influence the "selected outcome(s) of interest" in the experience of illegality.

Theoretically, LCI bridges research on migrant illegality with ecological and age-stratified life course approaches.[8] Migrant illegality research has used individual life course tenets to explain different outcomes. Immigration scholars have looked at how the state's timing in extending rights and benefits matters for how immigrants experience policy changes (García et al. 2022), how the *transition* to young adulthood shapes undocumented youth's incorporation patterns and future *trajectories* (Gonzales 2016), and how mixed-status immigrant families share experiences of multigenerational punishment given their *linked lives* with a focus on parent-minor children relationships (Enriquez 2015). However, the literature on migrant illegality has largely ignored the experiences of older immigrants and lacks a comprehensive model to capture how the experience of illegality changes across immigrants' lives. Meanwhile, life course approaches have been primarily used to study human development and aging, health and financial well-being (Salignac et al. 2020), and retirement (Kim and Moen 2002). A life course-based model has great potential to contextualize the shifts in immigrants' experiences of illegality.

I define the LCI model as follows: first, it uses an ecological life course approach (see figure 1) to center an individual's experience of illegality over time, contextualized within social environment, spatial location, social networks, and individual characteristics. *Social environment* includes institutions such as the law, culture, government, media, education, and work. *Spatial location* (place) includes their geographic location or place. *Social networks* (linked lives) include family, friends, and other social relations. *Individual characteristics* include chronological age, gender, race,

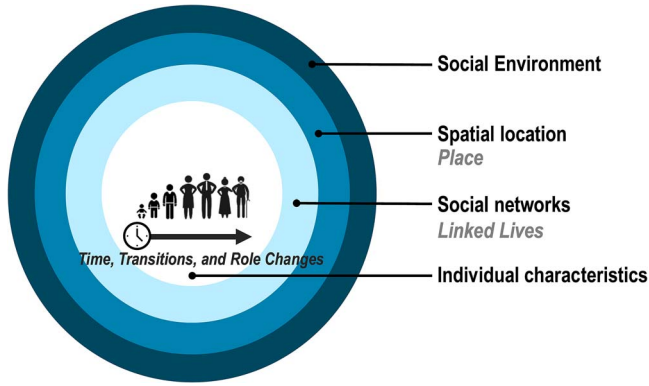

Figure 1. Ecological life course approach.

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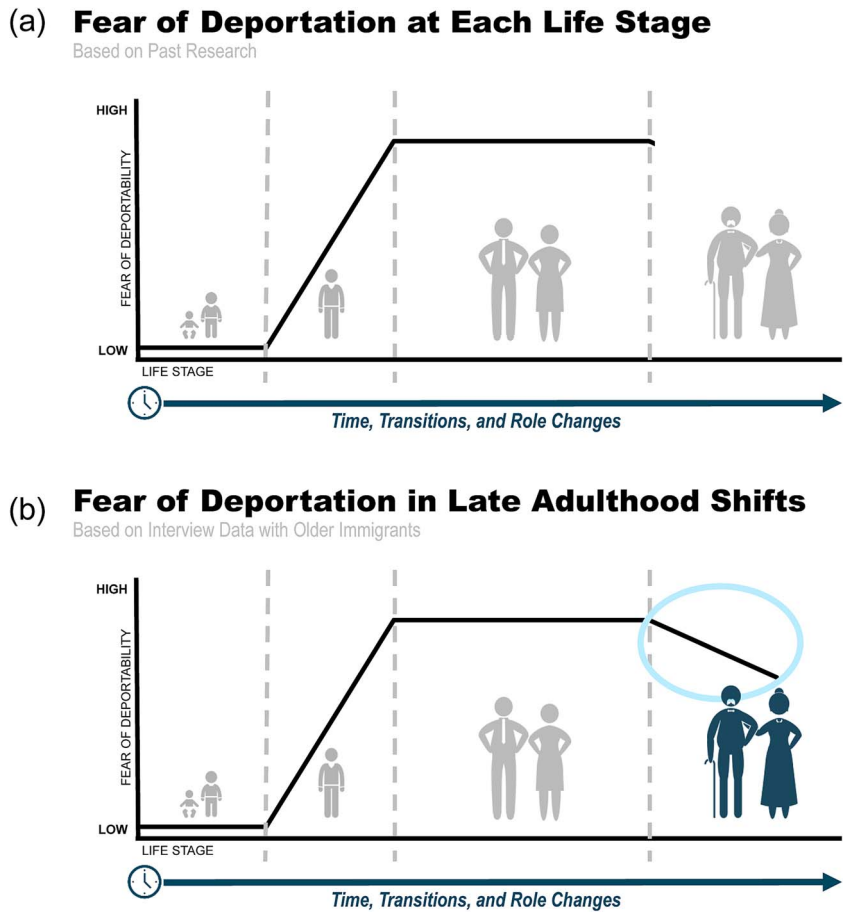

Figure 2. *Age-stratified life course approach* applied to fear of deportability. (a) Fear of deportation by life stage, based on past research (and respondent recollections). (b) Fear of deportation by life stage with an emphasis on late adulthood, based on interview data with older immigrants.

class, etc., and the actions individuals take by choice or constraint. Second, it emphasizes an age-stratified life course approach (see figure 2) focusing on *within-person change* (i.e., characteristics, behaviors, aging), life stages (e.g., childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, middle adulthood, late adulthood, etc.), and events, transitions, and trajectories throughout an individual's life (Alwin 2012). A life course approach thus allows the LCI model to capture the dynamism of the experience of illegality.

As seen in figure 2, I built the LCI model from prior migration scholarship on the experience of illegality (i.e., earlier life stages from childhood to adulthood) and this study's empirical in-depth interviews with older immigrants (i.e., late adulthood experiences) that also emphasize an age-stratified life course approach. Ultimately, the LCI model (see figure 3) adopts both ecological and age-stratified life course approaches and can be applied to different outcomes of the experience of illegality. In this paper, I apply it to the fear of deportation with a focus on the experiences of older immigrants. I offer my full LCI model as a better alternative to capture *how* and *why* various experiences of illegality *shift* across an individual's lifetime (i.e., within-person change). It can also capture diverging experiences as some factors change or become more or less important at different points in immigrants' lives. Both groups of interest—immigrants and older adults—are heterogeneous, and we need a conceptual model that can reflect diverse social experiences.

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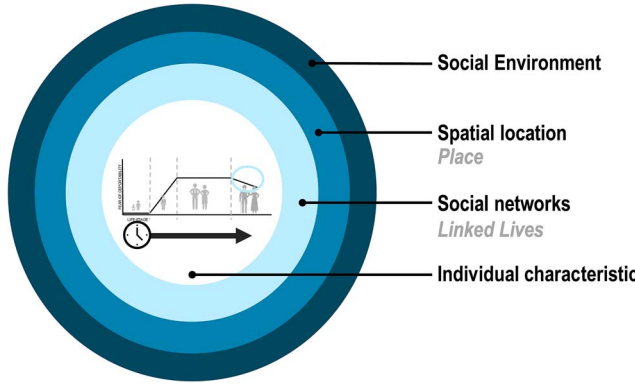

Figure 3. *A life course illegality (LCI) model.* The LCI model unites the ecological (figure 1) and the age-stratified life course approaches (figure 2) and applies to the fear of deportation.

Ecological life course approach to illegality

The ecological dynamics of the experience of illegality have been *individually* documented by immigration scholars in different studies. They have repeatedly shown how the *social environment*, from the law (Menjívar and Abrego 2012) to the media (Chavez 2013b) to schools and work (Gleeson and Gonzales 2012) to culture, impacts the experience of illegality. *Spatial location* or *place* illegality research has highlighted how some geographic areas make immigrants feel less safe (e.g., near the US.-Mexico border, airports, more conservative-leaning areas) compared to places perceived as less threatening (e.g., sanctuary cities, schools, more liberal-leaning areas) (García 2021; Valdivia 2019). Immigrants' *social networks* (or *linked lives*), especially interpersonal ties with family and friends, have also been well-studied. Many scholars have examined how parents' illegality impacts children's well-being (Enriquez 2015). Parents' immigration status also impacts educational access/mobility (Yoshikawa 2011), health access (Hacker et al. 2015), and much more. Finally, research on *individual characteristics* that shape illegality abounds, often comparing how the experience of illegality differs by gender (Enriquez 2017), race (Armenta 2017; Asad and Clair 2018; Gómez Cervantes 2021; Herrera 2016; Menjívar 2021), and class (Ramírez 2018). Scholars have devoted scant attention to the role of aging and within-person change across life stages, while focusing more on between-person and situational differences in fear of deportation.

Age-stratified life course approach to illegality

Meanwhile, life course scholars have repeatedly documented how different associated events, transitions, and opportunities create diverging trajectories for each life stage (see figure 2). Scholars of migrant illegality have examined how immigration status affects individual life stages—particularly childhood, young adulthood, and adulthood. Extensive research on childhood has shown how deportation and its threat impact children's development and socioeconomic stability, especially when minor children are separated from their parents (Dreby 2012); how experiences of illegality diverge during the transition to adulthood (Gonzales 2016); and how illegality shapes family formation in adulthood years (Enriquez 2020)—fear of deportation is present in all these experiences. Each has highlighted how particular institutions matter more/less in each life stage. For example, schools matter more in childhood/young adulthood; higher education institutions, work, and marriage/divorces in adulthood; and retirement, healthcare, and government offices (Social Security and Medicare) in late adulthood (Ayón 2019; Ayón et al. 2023). The LCI model builds on these past studies of immigrants' experience of illegality at other life stages and seeks to understand illegality, and more particularly the fear of deportation, over the life course, adding how the experience *changes* in late adulthood.

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Three significant life course mechanisms influence the shifts in older immigrants' fear of deportability—the embodiment of illegality, life transitions, and temporal morality. Our discussions reveal that the physical changes of aging shift older immigrants' embodiment of illegality. Then, older immigrants experience multiple important life transitions in late adulthood, like changes in transportation, work, and family responsibilities that further lessen their fears. Lastly, the more time immigrants spend in the US, acculturating and aging, their sense of security grows based on their ongoing abiding by US laws and shared social and age-based moral norms. For each mechanism, I incorporate at least one example where respondents allude to changes in their fear of deportation compared to the past. These three significant mechanisms are grounded within the LCI model.

Mechanisms within the LCI model

Embodiment of illegality

Respondents believed their aging physical appearance influenced how others viewed them. Indeed, scholars have argued that older adults are less visible in today's society, and this is especially true for marginalized groups like women (Hurd 2000), LGBTQ populations (Butler 2004), and incarcerated individuals (Psick et al. 2017). I find that this is also the case for older undocumented immigrants. They no longer fit the "undocumented stereotype": young, Latino (often Mexican), working-class, and male (Chavez 2013b). Older immigrants felt that their bodily aging concealed their lack of legal status because ageist stereotypes are stronger than stereotypes of illegality at this life stage. In other words, being perceived as older automatically superseded being labeled as undocumented. Consequently, their fear of deportation lessened.

Graying hair, visible physical ailments, and age maturity no longer fit the "undocumented stereotype." César Lazcano (58) listed all the reasons he was not afraid of being deported: "Look at me, fortunately. I have several advantages: I am light skinned and older looking. They [immigration enforcement agents] can see me and ask me questions if they like, but it is unlikely." César recognized his physical appearance as key to avoiding the attention of immigration enforcement, highlighting being older-looking in addition to his light skin color. He believed that his appearance, which no longer fit the "undocumented stereotype," made it unlikely he would be targeted, although it was still possible. Most older undocumented immigrants I interviewed were primarily gray-haired, and others had visible physical ailments or disabilities. This increased their sense of security and decreased fear of apprehension. Similarly, research on immigrant stereotypes shows that older people are less likely to be seen as "undocumented" (Flores and Schachter 2018). Their physical aging obscures their immigration status; in other words, their aging impacts how they embody illegality and, consequently, their experience of deportability.

The incompatibility of ageist stereotypes with ideas of "undocumented immigrants" was also present across older immigrants' social networks. It gave older immigrants some sense of security that others could not easily stereotype them. Sara Guzmán (66) was the caregiver of an older white man. His two daughters, both immigration agents, assured Sara her age and appearance did not fit the profile of an undocumented immigrant:

> They told me that agents do not target older adults because of our appearance; we have acquired the language and local dialects and dress like others here. It is difficult for them to detain anyone, but [it is] even more challenging to detain an older adult. [Immigration agents] know that, for the most part, many older adults are legal immigrants . . . It is tough for them to distinguish whether older adults are legal or not.

Sara confirmed that her "older" appearance and acculturation[9] to an "American lifestyle" shielded her. Knowing this made her significantly less afraid, allowing her to move more freely. Similarly, other older immigrants described how people in their social networks reinforced their beliefs that "older people" were not the primary targets of immigration enforcement.

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Bodily aging and spatial location also affected how older immigrants experienced illegality; specifically, the high number of older Latinos in the East Bay provided an additional sense of security. Efrén Alonso (51) had worked for almost two decades in the carpet-cleaning industry in Oakland and the surrounding areas. He often drove into many neighborhoods to complete work orders. He shared how spatial location mattered: "When you are older, people won't see you do anything out of the ordinary. For better or worse, all the people you see on the street are older immigrants because we all look the same here in Oakland... We all look Hispanic and older, everyone." Efrén associated being "established" with age and life experience. In addition, he felt that the large number of older Latino immigrants in his immediate spatial location made it more difficult to be singled out when engaged in his day-to-day activities. They no longer embodied the stereotypical image of an undocumented immigrant, and their spatial location and broader social environment contributed to this too.

Other respondents believed their older appearance made them less of a deportation priority, declaring, "*Mírame, ya estoy vieja/o*" (Look at me: I am old).[10] They believed that even if seen as "illegal," they were no longer an enforcement priority. In their view, immigration agents were not interested in detaining "old people." Demographic data on actual deportations supports this idea, indicating that older immigrants are deported at lower rates (Syracuse TRAC Reports 2023). Respondents felt they had aged out of being primary targets of racial and gendered practices of immigration enforcement.

Life transitions

As a result of life transitions,[11] many respondents were no longer or decreasingly present in spaces or engaged in activities—including driving, working, and family responsibilities—that made them vulnerable to immigration enforcement. While both men and women experienced a shifting fear of deportation, it is for different reasons, and what follows shows that men's responses concentrated more on work-related transitions, women's on family-related transitions.

Changes in driving and transportation

While research has shown that traffic stops are immigrants' most common interactions with any enforcement agency (Lacayo 2010), many respondents drove less or stopped altogether due to cost or health concerns. For example, although Sara still worked, she no longer drove, depending instead on public transportation, Uber, and her adult son: "I do not drive anymore; it gives me anxiety. If it is too late, I usually take an Uber back home [so I don't] worry about getting home safely." Thus, she no longer participated in an activity frequently associated with immigrant surveillance. Others transitioned to public transit or relying on family and friends, which lessened their fear of detainment at a traffic stop. Access to good public transportation in their spatial location facilitated this.

Respondents who continued to drive felt safer doing so thanks to the expansion of state legislation granting undocumented people access to driver's licenses, which most had.[12] Severino Flores (56) shared that he was less fearful of deportation because he now had a license:

Severino:	Right now, not so much, but before yes. Oh my God, I would see a police officer and pray to God that nothing would happen to me.
Author:	And why were you afraid before and not now?
Severino:	... Since I have my license, it gives me more confidence to drive.

Like Severino, many older immigrants were less afraid of driving thanks to the changed social environment that now allowed them licenses.

Changes in work

Older immigrants' changing relationship with work and transition out of traditional employee-employer relationships also reduced fear. Formal employment is highly surveilled by immigration

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enforcement because of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, which requires employers to verify the work authorization of new employees and includes sanctions for employers who knowingly hire undocumented immigrants (Gleeson and Griffith 2021). Employees fill out an I-9 Employment Eligibility Verification form at the time of hire that includes (1) an employee's information and attestation of work eligibility and (2) the employer or authorized representative's review of acceptable authorization documents (e.g., US passport, permanent resident card, driver's license or ID card with a Social Security card without work restrictions). The rise of workplace compliance surveillance—especially for low-income workers—historically increased enforcement practices like workplace raids and employer audits of employee records.

Older immigrants who had left the workforce or worked in what they perceived as low-risk employment were less afraid because they had no contact with workplace compliance. For example, Emanuel Fonseca (63) recalled being let go from past factory positions because they requested proof of work authorization. He shared that once you received a work verification letter, "no one showed up to work anymore because the letter stated until what day they had work, and after that, you moved on." However, he was no longer working and did not feel in danger of being targeted by immigration officials: "I don't work right now, so I do not worry about being deported." Others who had left the workforce felt similarly.

Some respondents had worked with the same employers for years or even decades. Most were not asked for work authorization after their initial hiring. In addition, many respondents no longer worked in places targeted by immigration enforcement like factories/warehouses and agricultural fields. For example, when I talked to Tadeo Jiménez (55), he described immigration raids as infrequent, only happening under certain circumstances: "There will always be raids here, especially in factories or fields, but [only] when *la Migra* knows that there are several undocumented immigrants in companies . . . or when someone snitches on someone or a company. The truth is that they [immigration enforcement] will not walk door-to-door to check for immigrants." From Tadeo's experience, immigration enforcement scrutinizes companies accused by a third party of hiring undocumented workers. He also explained that raids focused on specific industries in which he was no longer active, having since moved into the restaurant industry. In over two decades of working in the same place, he had not encountered random enforcement checks like those he heard about and experienced when working in the fields. He also recognized that logistically, it was unlikely that immigration agents would check every home for undocumented immigrants without some cause or tip. Thus, Tadeo's changing work environment altered his experience of illegality.

Other older immigrants had transitioned to self-employment or small-business ownership and thus no longer had to show proof of work authorization.[13] Severino started his painting business four years after California passed legislation allowing individuals with an Individual Taxpayer Identification Number (ITIN)[14] to apply for state professional licenses that had previously required a Social Security Number (SSN). Severino felt more secure as a contractor, since he controlled where he traveled. He hired employees to paint while he focused on customer relationships and administrative tasks. Older immigrants' experience of illegality through work shows how immigration surveillance is embedded in traditional employer-employee relationships.

Changes in familial responsibilities

Dependent children becoming legal adults changed the consequences of deportation for older immigrants as their familial responsibilities evolved. First, the pressure many older immigrants felt to provide financially for their children decreased, as did their legal obligations. Second, adult children's immigration status mattered. Third, respondents with young children in Mexico sent fewer remittances as those children became adults. Similarly, those without children provided less financial support for other relatives in Mexico over time. Older immigrants' experiences are intricately tied to their families and their roles. Scholars of aging and the life course call this the principle of "linked lives" (Settersten 2015, 217).

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Older immigrants with documented adult children

As older immigrants aged and became less legally and financially liable for their adult children's welfare, their fear of deportation also lessened, especially when their adult children were citizens or held some legal immigration status.[15] At home, many older immigrants were no longer the primary financial providers or legal guardians of their now-adult children. In our interview, Magdalena Pardo (55) recalled how she feared deportation more when her children were dependent minors: "I was scared, and more so before, when my children were young. Right now, it is different. They know that if they [immigration enforcement] deport me, if they catch me, they [my children] must first check if I can be released on bail, and if not, well, they are old enough to visit me in Mexico now." Magdalena, like all respondents, did not want to be deported. Still, she recognized that the burden of deportation had changed. Her two citizen adult children no longer risked placement in foster care or state supervision and were better able to take care of themselves. Both had lived independently since moving out for college. Magdalena recognized that they could travel internationally—including to visit her in Mexico,—advocate for her, and continue living in the US. Many adult children were self-sufficient or could be if necessary. In sum, older immigrants' changing family responsibilities lessened their fear of deportation because the consequences had changed—especially if they had citizen children.

Older immigrants with DACAmented children felt similarly.[16] For example, when asked about his thoughts on deportation, Ivan Sanchez (53) expressed relief knowing that his daughter was legally an adult and protected under the DACA executive order: "It . . . leaves you with more space not to think about that [deportation], that she can already do this and that . . . We think our daughter will be okay . . . and in the future, she will be able to do more things hopefully if more laws pass like this one." Ivan's fear diminished because his daughter had some legal protections as an adult. Past conversations between Ivan, his wife, and extended family members were now irrelevant. For example, he remembered talking to his wife about what would happen to their daughter if he were deported: "My daughter was younger then [compared to] now. She is over 18 years old now... But my wife's aunt told us to authorize her to pick up our daughter from school . . . . It was to help my daughter if anything happened to us." Now Ivan saw that his daughter had a part-time job, was creating a solid support network at a local four-year university, would graduate soon, and would acquire full-time employment. DACA semi-protected his daughter from deportation and provided opportunities for her future, even if he was absent. Ivan's social environment, specifically immigration laws, and his life transitions shaped his experience, lessening his fear.

Older immigrants with undocumented adult children

While older immigrants felt less visible to the state and less vulnerable to deportation themselves, they remain concerned about the deportation regime's effects on their undocumented adult children (and other family members) who were at the life stage of being prime targets for enforcement. While in K-12 education, their young children were incorporated into the US through the education system until they aged out. This shift in the focus of their concern is significant because older immigrants often depend on the support of their children to weather old age. The looming threat of deportation of their adult children jeopardized older immigrants' social support stability and exacerbated family inequalities. The lives of older immigrants and their adult children are linked.

Having had their own lives and parenting shaped by illegality, older immigrants were concerned for their undocumented adult children's well-being. Isadora Arias (65) no longer worked and felt that she was less subject to immigration enforcement herself, but she frequently worried about her undocumented sons. She repeatedly stated, "Everyone is in danger when you are working out and about." She felt her sons were in danger and shared how she feared for her eldest son's safety:

> I felt horrible. I knew he was driving back from San Diego to Oakland—every Friday. I was always waiting for him to pass the checkpoints and to call me to say, "Mom, I arrived." I worried

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> every week . . . It was dangerous because . . . multiple workers carpooled together. . . . They were all Latinos and filthy after a long day's work in roofing. They had to work, but this could draw their [police/immigration agents'] attention.

She feared that her son's exposure while driving across the state, even with a valid Washington state driver's license, increased his risk of detainment. Isadora worried about his well-being, the impact detention would have on his minor children, especially economically, and her financial future since her son also provided for her. For this reason, Isadora asked him to change jobs. She wanted him to commute less to decrease the probability of law enforcement stopping and profiling him as undocumented.

Fear for undocumented adult children was also not the same across children. For example, when their adult children were childless, older immigrants had different concerns. Isadora asked her youngest son to decrease his travel within the US: "My son, who doesn't have papers, travels to Chicago and many other places with his passport only. I told him, 'Son, don't travel so much right now because with the president [Trump] that we have.' He just said, "Oh, Mom," and then traveled for three months without me knowing . . . He does not have kids to worry about, right?" Our conversation showed that Isadora's youngest son had not shared that he was traveling because she would be concerned. However, Isadora's social and economic well-being depended on both her sons' safety because they paid her rent, gave her a small income, and visited her in her one-bedroom rental. The complex connections between Isadora's fears, immigration status, familial interdependence, and her adult sons' different family situations exemplify how the lives of older immigrants and their adult children are linked**.** Their concern about the deportation regime had shifted.

Older immigrants with other types of families

Over time, the need to support a family in Mexico (via remittances) also waned, further decreasing the consequences of deportation. Older immigrants with transnational families, especially those with children in Mexico, described how the practice of sending remittances to cover their children's basic needs, education, and discretionary expenses became less frequent once their children reached adulthood. Older immigrants often remained in the US to serve as economic providers within their families. For example, Calvino Valdovinos (52) described how he had migrated to the US to provide financially for his minor children after being laid off from his factory job in Mexico: "My children (and their well-being) come first. I sent child support remittances weekly while my children were minors. That is precisely what I did; my children came first, even after their mother and I divorced." He supported his children financially until they were adults. However, these remittance patterns had changed now that they were grown and had families. He shared, "I don't have anything, no responsibilities, to stop me if something [deportation] happens—not anymore." Calvino's fear of deportation has decreased because he no longer feels the same responsibility in his current life stage. Older immigrants with children abroad shared similar beliefs since "how" they had been expected to parent shifted.

Some respondents did not have children but provided financial support for aging parents and other family members. For example, Martin Campos (50) had sent regular remittances to Mexico to cover his father's living expenses. After his father passed, Martin sent remittances periodically to other family members but recognized that it did not carry the same consequences. Martin explained, "I help them because it comes from my heart, and that is why I migrated in the first place. I also share with them: 'I work hard to survive, and while I am able-bodied . . . I will be here.' I will be okay, regardless . . . However, they do not depend on me. They are adults." As an older immigrant who had no children, he did not feel the same pressure to provide. The experience of illegality for childless immigrants differed from those with children. Older immigrants' fears thus shifted as they transitioned from the family responsibilities of one life stage to the next, and for parents, their adult children's immigration status and geographic location mattered.

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Temporal morality

Time in the US and changing cultural age norms in older immigrants' broader social environment helped shift their deportation fears. The longer immigrants lived in the US, the more they acculturated to local norms. For example, many older immigrants felt a sense of security because of the "good immigrant narrative" embedded in their larger environment by politicians and the media or the idea that abiding by broader social norms in their day-to-day interactions will "protect" them. For example, Nieves Jiménez (53) lived with her partner, one adult daughter, and her daughter's boyfriend in a two-story house in Oakland, California, while her other daughters lived in Mexico. Her adult daughters in Mexico frequently voiced concerns about her safety as an undocumented immigrant when they saw raids in the news. Nieves reassured them of her safety using the "good immigrant" narrative: "I told my daughter, 'No, that is a lie. They detain people who have… murdered and all that…. They detain you if you have a criminal background…I don't put myself in danger.'" Over time, Nieves had adopted the "good immigrant" narrative, believing she would be targeted for deportation only if she committed a crime. Most interviewees shared that belief.

Older immigrants' belief in the "good immigrant" narrative and their success navigating US bureaucracy over their lifetime further alleviated fear. For example, because he was a law-abiding citizen without a criminal record, Calvino was okay with being fingerprinted in support of his recent U-Visa[17] immigration application:

> I am not afraid because when you apply [for the U-Visa], the application states that the FBI will run a background check … I applied [for the U-Visa] three years ago, and they haven't deported me. It means that I am fine. When I applied, they asked if I was a prostitute or involved in sex trafficking, drugs, or drug trafficking… They ask you the same question ten times [in different ways]… I am aware [of what I declared on my application]. As I said, I voluntarily went to the immigration office and gave my fingerprints. I am still here … It means that what I declared was true. I have a clean record.

Calvino believed he would have been deported if he had committed a crime. On the contrary, he was a cooperating survivor of a violent crime; moreover, he had willingly made himself visible to immigration services by submitting his biometrics and a successful U-Visa application. The dominant narratives in their broader social environment, including the news, internet, and other media, reinforced Calvino's belief that he was not an immigration enforcement priority because he had committed no crimes. Other older immigrants believed that their good behavior, characterized by working hard, paying taxes, and obeying traffic laws over the years, protected them.

Law-abiding behaviors were also influenced by changes to older immigrants' routines and age norms. Over time, they adhered to culturally defined age norms, which are "widely held beliefs about age-appropriate behaviors [that] guide processes of adult socialization" (Massoglia and Uggen 2010, 544). Respondents described their current lifestyles as "tranquil" compared to those of earlier adulthood, mainly consisting of low-risk, fixed routines. Martin explained what he considered law-abiding behavior when I asked him if he was ever afraid of being deported:

Martin:	No, I haven't had any problems here. The reason is that we leave the house to work and that's it. I am tranquil. I don't go out much.
Author:	Have you ever been afraid of deportation?
Martin:	No, not here. Because I have been tranquil, we are very calm in all this area I live in. Here in this area of Hayward, we are tranquil. We all go to the store; we meet up with people there… I [go to] a laundromat with a cafeteria, [eat] some donuts with coffee, and [chat] with immigrants from Guatemala and El Salvador. I live comfortably. We never think that they will come and detain us, no.

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To Martin, doing laundry at the local laundromat and socializing at local cafes were part of a "tranquil" or law-abiding, peaceful lifestyle that he believed was unlikely to draw attention. He also recognized having aged out of "high-risk activities," such as drinking and partying. Martin described having socialized more with friends at restaurants and celebrations in the past. Martin's story exemplifies how law-abiding behavior is also shaped by changing age norms for specific activities and places older immigrants spend their time. Other older immigrants similarly referenced living "tranquil" lifestyles at this stage. Expanding understandings of the "good immigrant" narrative, these findings build on Andrews's (2018) work on "moralizing regulation," a phenomenon where immigrants perceive protection or punishment as responses to their behavior. The older immigrants' stories show how age norms, time in the US, acculturation to the US social environment, and age-influenced changes to daily routines all play a role in the shifting of immigrants' fears.

Discussion/conclusion

This article claims that fear of deportation depends on one's position in the life course. It introduces the LCI model—based on ecological and age-stratified life course approaches—using past research on the fear of deportability in earlier life stages and adds older immigrants' perspectives. It highlights three critical mechanisms in late adulthood that affect immigrants' fear of deportation: the embodiment of illegality, life transitions, and temporal morality. I show how changes and experiences across immigrants' life course have diminished some of their deportation fears. However, the consequences of illegality still threaten their economic and social well-being, which can impact health and overall well-being.

This study contributes to theories of immigrant incorporation and life course/aging. An expanding collection of studies with adult children captures how parent illegality affects adult children's support of parents. Such studies focus on adult children's perceptions of familial roles rather than older parents' (Delgado 2022)—with the exception of some work that includes both points of view (García Valdivia 2022). This study advances the conversation about how immigrants' family relationships change over the life course, specifically how undocumented older parents' changing familial roles impact their fear and the consequences of deportation.

This approach also cautions against omitting life course-based approaches to studying the experiences of illegality. Hence, it requires researchers to consider how the experience of illegality is embedded at different levels (e.g., societal, group, and individual) across time. I invite scholars to use the proposed LCI model to study how other aspects of the experience of illegality vary across the life course beyond fear of deportation. Longitudinal explorations using the LCI model could be conducted by interviewing immigrants at earlier life stages and following them across time to fully understand the mechanisms that matter more (or less) at every life stage. For example, researchers could more profoundly study how older immigrants' "linked lives" with their adult children change.

Future research may also consider how older immigrants fear deportation and how its consequences can change during unsettled times, like COVID-19 or election years (for election example, see Díaz McConnell and Martinez 2024).[18] Other work could focus on how undocumented immigrants' embodiment of illegality intersects with race, aging, and changes over time in different life domains (and institutions). Some older immigrants may live their day-to-day lives without being labeled or treated as "illegal." Others are starting to experience "invisible illegality" or "when individuals do not have legal authorization to be in the United States, but they are not typically suspected of being illegally in the country" (Flores and Schachter 2018, 863). As a result, their experience of illegality is more like that of undocumented migrants who can pass as "legal" (e.g., undocumented European and Canadian citizens, high-status Asian workers, light-skinned Latin Americans) because others do not stereotype them as undocumented, no matter their age (Cho 2019). Invisible illegality is a double-edged sword, however, rendering older immigrants' new needs and suffering invisible to state authorities and the wider public. A life course approach,

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like LCI, enriches understanding of the diverse experiences and consequences of illegality for thousands of undocumented immigrants who remain "without papers" at different life stages.

Finally, I suggest that social scientists, policymakers, and other professionals use the LCI model to understand how the experience of illegality changes within individuals and as their social environment, spatial location, and social networks change. For example, these findings likely represent a best-case scenario for older immigrants. From the LCI model, we know that spatial location matters. California and many cities in the East Bay are considered "sanctuaries," which means that state and local organizations limit their cooperation with immigration officials. They also have a relatively robust social safety net for undocumented people of all ages, which provides some support in the absence of federal benefits. In contrast, older immigrants living in places with no or a small Latino population may experience a heightened sense of deportability. However, California law could become more restrictive—similar to anti-immigrant legislation in the 1990s—and current more restrictive places could become more welcoming. In these cases, the LCI model would continue to help explain how immigrants' fears around deportability and its consequences shift. Scholars might also use the LCI model to investigate how illegality takes shape in less welcoming locations (e.g., states with weaker safety nets, lower living costs, etc.) or at other periods when federal/state/local restrictions intensify. Such studies would increase our understanding of the experience of illegality across time and advance the study of immigrant incorporation.

Endnotes

1. To protect confidentiality, all names are pseudonyms. All quotations have been translated into English by the author.
2. Everyone knew someone, such as a family member, friend, or community member, who had been deported, and some had been deported at some point in their lives. At the time of the interviews, five respondents had experienced deportation in the past, often during initial migration.
3. The larger study strategically sampled by immigration status within the US-based respondents—approximately one-third undocumented, one-third legal permanent residents, and one-third naturalized US citizens.
4. However, most respondents had experienced anti-immigrant and restrictive policies in their lifetimes, like the 1990s when California's laws were less accommodating to immigrants.
5. In January 2020, California (Senate Bill 104) expanded full-scope Medi-Cal to young adults under the age of 26 regardless of citizenship or immigration status if all eligibility and income limits were met.
6. This research was conducted before the expansion of statewide full-scope Medi-Cal healthcare coverage (Assembly Bill 133) for low-income Californians over 50, regardless of immigration status, effective May 1, 2022 (Office of the Governor Gavin Newsom 2021).
7. Near the end of my data collection, the COVID-19 pandemic began. As a result, I transitioned to phone interviews for the last interviews. The three-hour interviews were initial interviews with a longer questionnaire that was shortened after the fourth interview. Subsequent interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 120 minutes.
8. The terms "life course approach," "life course framework," "life course theory," "life course paradigm," and "life course perspective" have many definitions across disciplines; for more information, see Alwin (2012). Therefore, I will define the two life course approaches I synthesize and use for this paper.
9. Acculturation is defined here as the adoption of behavior of the surrounding culture.
10. All older undocumented immigrants in this study were from Central Mexico states that tend to have lighter skin tones given their colonization history; none were indigenous, and most were light/brown-skinned. However, I did not formally measure skin tone or phenotype. Thus, I cannot directly speak to differences in skin tone.

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11. Life transitions are gradual changes that are "brief in scope and refer to changes in state" (Settersten and Mayer 1997, 252).
12. Assembly Bill 60 granted California residents, regardless of immigration status, the ability to apply for a driver's license starting in January 2015. As of March 2023, nineteen states and the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico have laws that grant driver's licenses to undocumented immigrants (National Immigration Law Center 2023).
13. Immigration law penalizes hiring undocumented workers, but they can be business owners. Businesses are standalone tax entities.
14. An ITIN is "a tax processing number only available for certain nonresident and resident aliens, their spouses, and dependents who cannot get an SSN" (Internal Revenue Service 2023). It was created in July 1996 for people to pay taxes even if they do not have a SSN number.
15. Like most parents, older undocumented immigrants wanted to continue to support their children's mobility and well-being into adulthood.
16. "DACAmented" refers to individuals with temporary deportation protections and work permits under Obama's Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) 2012 program. Criteria include being brought to the US as a child, obeying the law, staying in school, or enlisting in the military (US Citizenship and Immigration Services 2017).
17. The U-nonimmigrant status (U-Visa) grants up to 10,000 visas/year for victims of crimes who have suffered mental or physical abuse in the US and help government officials in the investigation (US Citizenship and Immigration Services 2018).
18. This paper does not directly address COVID-19's role in influencing fear of deportation because of timing: more than half of the interviews were conducted before the pandemic.

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Data availability

The data underlying this article cannot be shared publicly to protect the privacy of individuals who participated in the study.

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