



The impact and implications of undocumented immigration on individual and collective health in the United States

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ABSTRACT

A nation of immigrants, the United States currently has more foreign-born residents than any other country; approximately 28% of these foreign-born residents are undocumented immigrants—individuals who either entered or are currently residing in the country without valid immigration or residency documents. The complex and constantly changing social, political, and economic context of undocumented migration has profound effects on individuals, families, and communities. The lack of demographic and epidemiologic data on undocumented immigrants is a major public health challenge. In this article, we identify multiple dimensions of vulnerability among undocumented persons; examine how undocumentedness impacts health and health care access and utilization; and consider the professional, practice, and policy issues and implications for nurses.

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The United States is a nation of immigrants, with the largest population of foreign-born residents of any nation in the world (Grieco et al., 2012). According to the United Nations (2013), the United States currently hosts 46 million international immigrants, accounting for 13% of the national population and nearly 20% of the international immigrant population. Other developed countries with significant immigrant populations include the Russian Federation (11 million), Germany (10 million), France (6 million), Canada (7 million), Australia (6 million), and Spain (6 million); together, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are home to 17 million immigrants (United Nations, 2013). One of

the major challenges facing U.S. health care providers and policy makers is the lack of official counts or registries of undocumented immigrants (i.e., those individuals who either entered or are currently residing in the country without valid immigration or residency documents). To calculate the undocumented, unauthorized immigrant population, demographers begin with the total recorded foreign-born population at a given point in time from which they subtract the estimated number of legally resident population on the same date (Hoefer, Rytina & Baker, 2012). Demographers estimate that among the estimated 40 million foreign-born individuals living in the United

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States in 2010, approximately 11.2 million were undocumented immigrants, representing 28% of the foreign-born population and 3.7% of the total population (Grieco et al., 2012; Gusmano, 2012; Passel & Cohn, 2011).

The dynamic, constantly changing social, political, and economic contexts of undocumented migration have profound effects on individuals, families, and communities (Ayón, 2009). Nursing and public health researchers point to the multiple and complex relationships among immigration, undocumentedness, health status, and health care access (Ayón, 2009; McEwen & Boyle, 2007; McEwen, Pasvogel, Gallegos, & Barrera, 2010; McGuire, 2014; McGuire & Georges, 2003; Messias, 1996). In this article, we examine the health implications of undocumentedness. We begin with an overview of undocumented migration and health, then explore the dimensions of vulnerability for undocumented persons, address health care access and utilization for undocumented populations, and conclude with a discussion of nurses' professional responsibilities vis-à-vis public policies impacting the provision of care to undocumented immigrants and their families.

Defining Undocumentedness

Documentation confers legal, social, and physical mobility and facilitates access to information, education, employment, services, and legal protections. *Undocumentedness* is a social construction of the 20th century that refers to the lack of tangible proof of identity (e.g., birth), status (e.g., nationality, citizenship, or immigration status), or qualifications (e.g., education, licensure, or professional training); an *undocumented immigrant* is an individual who lacks legal migration documentation (e.g., passport, visa, or residency

documentation) or presents forged or falsified documentation (Messias, 1996). Undocumented immigrants include those who enter the country legally with valid student, tourist, or temporary work visas but subsequently overstay the period of the visa or fall out of status (e.g., change employers, enter a different line of work, or are no longer enrolled in school). *Unauthorized immigrant* is the legal term used in current U.S. federal immigration laws and policies to refer to undocumented immigrants; the pejorative term *illegal immigrant* is a widely used colloquialism (Table 1).

In international law, *irregular migrant* refers to undocumented or clandestine immigrants who lack legal status in a transit or host country as a result of either undocumented entry or visa expiration (Global Migration Group, 2008). Other migrant classifications include voluntary migrants and forced migrants (a category that includes refugees, asylum seekers, and individuals subjected to human trafficking). These categories are not mutually exclusive. For example, irregular migrants include both individuals who left their country of origin voluntarily and those who were forced to leave. Asylum seekers constitute approximately 10% of undocumented individuals who enter the United States annually; asylum seekers whose petitions are denied become unauthorized and must leave voluntarily or risk deportation (Pearce, Clifford, & Tandon, 2011). Temporary protected status is available to individuals in the United States who are citizens of specific countries that the Secretary of Homeland Security has deemed may present significant risks to nationals if they return to their homeland (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, n.d.).

It is important to note that undocumentedness is not necessarily a permanent or fixed status. Over time, an individual may move between being documented and undocumented; therefore, the undocumented and documented are not two distinct, easily

Table 1 – Immigrant Classifications

Classification	Definition/Examples
Authorized immigrant	Legal term for a foreign citizen present in the U.S. who is in possession of a valid visa approved by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS).
Unauthorized immigrant	Legal term for non-U.S. citizen present in the U.S. without valid or current immigration documentation. Referred to colloquially as irregular, illegal, and undocumented immigrant.
Refugee	Individual forced to flee home country due to war, violence, or persecution based on race, religion, ethnicity, nationality, or political affiliation.
Asylum seeker	Individual fleeing home country and seeking sanctuary and legal protection in another country
Temporary protected status	U.S. Department of Homeland Security status granted to citizens of specific countries deemed at significant risk in their home countries; allows individual to remain in U.S. temporarily.
Voluntary migrant	Individual who migrates on own personal accord for economic, social, and educational opportunities and/or family reunification.
Involuntary migrant	Individual forced to migrate, includes refugees, asylum seekers, and victims of human trafficking
Irregular immigrant	Individual present in a host or transit country without legal immigration status as a result of either undocumented entry or visa expiration. Also referred to as undocumented, clandestine, and unauthorized immigrant.

Data from Global Migration Group, 2008; Travel.State.Gov., n.d.; USA for UNHCR (n.d.); U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, n.d.

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