

UNDOCUMENTED

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Abstract

One of the most controversial topics in the United States today is the subject of immigration and border security. This qualitative case study highlights the plight of one man who chose to enter the United States without proper documentation over twenty years ago and describes his difficult journey to legal citizenship. Through changing laws and regulations, he lived in a constant state of flux while struggling to support his family in the midst of his pursuit of a Green Card. Through triangulation of data sources, the researchers illustrate the participant's need for citizenship, the process he faced, and the journey he experienced juxtaposed against his perceptions of the immigration process and the condemning labels he endured as an undocumented immigrant. The findings and the implications of the study present unique perspectives of the arduous journey to citizenship that one immigrant and his family experienced.

Keywords: undocumented immigrants, immigration, *Coyotes*, human trafficking, Legal Permanent Residency (LPR)

Introduction

According to the Pew Research Center (Krogstad, Passel, & Cohn, 2017), there were 11 million unauthorized immigrants in the United States as of 2015 with projections of a small increase to 11.3 million in 2016. According to the Pew Research Center, there has been a steady rise of unauthorized immigrants from the 1990s with a reported 3.5 million peaking at 12.2 million in 2007 (Krogstad et al., 2017). This rise of unauthorized immigrants accounts for four percent of the total population in the United States. As of 2014, 66 percent of unauthorized adult immigrants had lived in the United States for at least ten years and only 14 percent of unauthorized adult immigrants had entered the country within the past five years (Krogstad et al., 2017). Since 2007, there has been an insignificant decline in the numbers of undocumented immigrants in the United States, yet this topic is highly debated from national political platforms to family dinner tables. Frequently changing laws severely affect the process and requirements with which immigrants must engage to enter the United States legally. This long, arduous, expensive, and many times confusing process requires the assistance of lawyers and government officials from both the home country and the United States working in tandem for an immigrant to move from undocumented into a legal status.

This case study highlights the immigration process for one man who entered the United States as an undocumented immigrant twenty years ago; for the purposes of this study, he shall be referred to as Martin Escamilla. The researchers followed the process of Martin crossing the Mexico-U.S. border, his progress in attaining an Immediate Relative Visa (IR1) for legal status, procuring a Green Card, and his hopes to one day become an American citizen. The perspectives of the Escamilla family, who are U.S. born citizens, are considered in addition to their perceptions concerning the process of attaining authorization to stay in the United States and the prejudices they have endured due to Martin's undocumented status and the threat of his deportation.

Problem Statement

There are many misconceptions and a high degree of prejudice against people who have entered the country illegally without undergoing the proper processes to obtain legal permission to reside in the U.S. This problem stems from long-held prejudices, misinformation, and a flawed process that changes dependent upon which political entity currently holds power.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to ascertain the perspectives of people directly affected by the immigration process. This research endeavor highlights the steps taken by one man and his family to obtain legal U.S. residency after entering the United States illegally over twenty years ago. This study also considered the participants' feelings about the process, past and current U.S. immigration laws, and certain labels given to undocumented citizens residing in the U.S.

The research questions guiding this study include:

1. What was the process for one immigrant, the primary participant of the study, to enter the U.S. illegally and then obtain a legal, documented status?
2. What were the perceptions of the participant and his family concerning the current citizenship process?
3. What were the perceptions of the participant and his family concerning current social and political labels used to describe undocumented immigrants; and how does this affect self-efficacy?

This case study is transferrable to other cases in that the study highlights similar perspectives of other immigrants regarding the citizenship process in the midst of the current sociopolitical climate.

Literature Review

The deportation of undocumented immigrants has been in the limelight of the current sociopolitical climate. Undocumented immigrants are defined as individuals who enter the United States illegally without proper vetting and/or people who have stayed past the allocated time provided by visas (Hoefer, Rytina, & Baker, 2013). According to Passel & Cohn (2009), there are 11.1 million undocumented immigrants in the United States with fifty-two percent of the undocumented immigrants entering illegally from Mexico, while others immigrated from Asia, Central America, and Sub-Sahara Africa. Six states in the U.S. share 59 percent of the total undocumented immigrants including: California, Texas, Florida, New York, New Jersey and Illinois (Passel & Cohn, 2009).

One of the most serious issues that undocumented immigrants face is being negatively labeled and ostracized. There have been various research studies conducted to understand labeling and its effect upon people. Ommundsen, Veer, Larsen, and Eilertsen (2014) found that labels such as the terms "illegal aliens" or "illegal immigrants" affect attitudes toward undocumented immigrants. Similarly, Pearson (2010) found that terms negatively affect attitudes toward undocumented immigrants. These and other studies indicate that the effect of labels upon immigrants increase feelings of being ostracized and negatively perceived.

Due to the constant shift in the sociopolitical environment, there has been a pendulum effect concerning the political views of immigrants and immigration in the United States. Due to this constant shift, there have been multiple immigration reforms over recent years that focused on undocumented immigrants receiving assistance to gain citizenship. The Border Security, Economic Opportunity, and Immigration Modernization Act (S.744) was proposed to aid immigrants in attaining citizenship who were undocumented, have no legal problems, paid their taxes, were able to pass a background check, and who spoke English could be considered for legal residency (S.744, 2013). Additional ways of receiving citizenship included the act of Consideration of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) that helps children entering the U.S. before June 15, 1997 and the Deferred Action for Parents of Americans and Permanent Residents (DAPA). These acts assist undocumented immigrants as they seek Legal Permanent Residency (LPR) status only if their children were U.S. citizens or lawful permanent residents and had been in the U.S. prior to January 1st, 2016 (4 Paths, 2016) Individuals covered under DACA are called "Dreamers" who were under the age of 30 in 2012 and have lived in the U. S. since they were sixteen years of age (Shoichet, Cullinane, & Kopan, 2017). In September 2017, the current political administration put forth to Congress a law that would over turn DACA, and therefore; they would not be able to study, work, or live in the U.S. legally (Shoichet, Cullinane, & Kopan, 2017). To date, no decision has been finalized concerning DACA. Furthermore, asylum status and a U-visa, a visa for victims of crime, are helpful in attaining quick legal residency. Individuals who have been accepted for asylum, are eligible to apply for permanent residence, one year after approval (4 Paths, 2016) and individuals who have been accepted with a U-visa, can receive a legal status through a work visa or in some circumstances a permanent residence.

Another common yet controversial way for undocumented immigrants to receive citizenship is through marriage. According to U.S. immigration laws created by the Obama Administration, undocumented immigrants may apply for citizenship through marriage after March 2013 (Gonzalez, 2013). There are a few loopholes included with this law such as returning to one's home country for up to ten years if their application is rejected and the undocumented immigrant cannot have been convicted of any serious crimes or involved with ongoing legal issues (Gonzalez, 2013). In situations where the immigrant can prove that their absence can cause harm to their spouse or children, they can have the three to ten year return requirement lessened to a short residency stay of possibly two to four weeks (Gonzalez, 2013).

Methodology

Qualitative Case Study

This qualitative case study design sought to ascertain the perspectives of undocumented people directly affected by the current immigration process through steps taken by one primary participant and his family in his journey to obtain legal U.S. residency after illegally entering the United States when he was only eighteen years of age.

Through the examination of the primary participant's experiences and life story, this research project considered the participants' feelings about the immigration process, both past and current U.S. immigration laws, and certain labels given to undocumented citizens who now reside within the U.S.

The United States Department of Homeland Security (DHS) posits that "[t]he unauthorized or undocumented resident immigrant population is defined as all foreign-born citizens who are not legal residents. Most unauthorized residents either entered the United States without inspection or were admitted temporarily and stayed past the date they were required to leave" (Hoefer, Rytina, & Baker, 2013, p. 1). Additionally, David Seminara, a fellow for the Center for Immigration Studies (CIS) stated, "Nearly half of the 12 million-plus illegal aliens in America arrived legally with temporary, non-immigrant visas. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) estimates that a "substantial" percentage of America's illegal population is made up of visa overstay--their estimates range from 27 to 57 percent" (Hoefer et al., 2013, p. 1). Considering this definition of undocumented immigration, the researchers constructed a qualitative case study to highlight thick, rich description to illustrate the plight of one man's journey.

As the 'conceptual epicenter' of social science research, especially those studies that employ qualitative methods, the methodology often lacks sufficient detail "to make any results that follow from the analytic method trustworthy" (Smagorinsky, 2008, p. 389). According to Smagorinsky (2008), one way to achieve this end in qualitative research is to provide a detailed, specific account of the method that enables readers to understand "unambiguously the means by which data are rendered into results [that includes] attention to the reporting of data collection, data reduction, data analysis, and the context of the investigation to make it clear why an illustrative presentation of data supports the claim that it offers" (p. 389).

Participants. The primary participant in this study included an undocumented immigrant who crossed the Mexico/U.S. border twenty years ago. His family and immigration sponsor were included as secondary participants. Aliases for the names of the participants in the study were used to protect their identities. The primary participant will be referred to as Martin Escamilla. His wife will be called Maria, and his children will be referred to as Sophia, Mia, and Adan respectively. The immigration sponsor will be included as Graciela Jimenez.

Interviews. The research process began by interviewing each participant involved in the study. The investigators obtained informed consent forms and then scheduled one-hour interviews with each participant. The interviews were conducted in the participants' homes where each participant felt most at ease. These interviews were semi-structured (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) and other questions evolved from the participants' statements. The principal investigator interviewed the participants and transcribed each of the interviews for data analyses. Follow-up interviews occurred when clarification was needed for any additional questions that arose during the data analysis process.

Documents. Documents included letters from each participant that were written on behalf of the primary participant applying for his Green Card. These letters indicated why he would be a good candidate for citizenship and why he chose to enter the country without the appropriate documents and permissions.

Records. Records included the lawyers' affidavits, applications for the Green Card, and financial statements of the immigrant man and his wife that showed the process they encountered while filing for legal immigration status.

Data Analysis

"The analysis of qualitative data is best described as a progression, not a stage; an ongoing process, not a one-time event" (Erlandson, 1993, p. 111). Throughout the research process, the researchers used the constant comparative method and open coding as suggested by Glaser and Strauss to produce grounded theory (1967) and began as each piece of the data was collected.

After all documents and records were gathered and interviews completed, each of the researchers used open coding (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to highlight themes as they emerged (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The researchers used colored highlighters to independently indicate recurring ideas in each piece of collected data. After the researchers coded the documents separately, they created a three-column chart listing the recurring themes each had found. Then the researchers met to debrief on these findings comparing and contrasting the similarities and differences of the themes listed. From the longer list of recurring ideas, the researchers were able to combine some of the ideas into three primary overarching themes that encompassed all of the ideas listed on the data analysis chart. Subthemes also emerged within the overarching themes derived from the data analysis chart and are included in the findings.

Triangulation. Throughout the data analyses, the researchers used triangulation to compare the themes from the interviews, documents, and records. The investigators established commonalities between what the participants stated in the interviews and what was found in the documents, records, and current immigration laws. Triangulation was imperative in this research study so that the researchers would either confirm or disconfirm the gathered information.

After the data was collected and analyzed, the researchers wrote a preliminary report and shared this report with each participant for member checking and to validate all findings. After the member checks were completed, the researchers used the collected data in the writing of this research article.

Findings: Journey to Citizenship

Naivety to Realization

The journey from the status of undocumented immigrant to legal citizen is an arduous process. It is fraught with obstacles from two governments, condescension from society, and great personal cost. In the letter Martin wrote as part of his immigration documentation packet, one of the points he had to address was to apologize for entering the U.S. illegally. In this apology, Martin shared the naïve perspective of an eighteen-year-old child who has grown up and realized the implications of his actions for a mature man and his family. In an excerpt from his letter included in his application to the U.S. Consulate, Martin shared,

When I came to the U.S., I was eighteen years old. I came to the U.S. chasing the American Dream and seeking a better life. When I came, I was young; I thought I was like a king and nothing could touch me as many young people do. I came to escape the violence I was experiencing, and I did not expect for things to happen the way that they did. No young kid expects to fall in love and begin a family, but that is what happened to me. I met my wife, we fell in love, and we began a life together. We had children, bought a house and a car, and we live simply. I do not ask for anyone to pay my way here, but I do ask them that I am allowed to stay and support my family. Please accept my sincere apology for coming to the U.S. in the wrong way; I did not expect my life to turn out as it has, but I thank God and my family every day for the life I have been given. Please forgive a young, ignorant kid who entered illegally at the age of eighteen but became an upstanding man who wants to make things right.

When he chose to cross the border from Mexico to the United States at eighteen years of age, Martin did not realize the implications this choice would have. At that time, he merely wanted to escape the poverty and violence that he believed plagued his home country. Little did he know that over twenty years later, he would start down a path that would require him to stay in the U.S. and seek legal citizenship.

Crossing the Border

Martin crossed the Mexico-U.S. border in January of 1996 and has lived in the United States for over twenty years. To cross the border, Martin sought the assistance of a *Coyote*, an individual specializing in human trafficking and border crossing. This individual assisted Martin and three other men in crossing the Rio Grande River and then travelling undetected through unforgiving Texas terrain until they reached Houston, Texas. This journey was fraught with danger and life-threatening situations. The men had to travel on foot for over three days, ran out of water, were chased by herds of bulls, and experienced the extreme weather of Texas during their travels. Martin had to pay the *Coyote* \$850 upfront for his assistance in crossing the border and then worked for an additional six months to pay the man who paid the rest of the debt to the *Coyote* much like an indentured servant. The aid of a *Coyote* was needed, as he knew the trails that are not monitored and the ways to travel without being detected. *Coyotes* also explain the necessary items immigrants need for the journey that include things like cream, water, food, plastic bags to carry clothes across the river, and a sewing kit to stitch any injuries incurred along the way.

Need for Citizenship

Martin, like many other undocumented immigrants before him, soon began to feel a great need for permanent U.S. citizenship. Once he married Maria, and their children were born, Martin quickly realized that he needed the stability that citizenship would provide for him and his growing family.

Initially, he began to consider the process of seeking citizenship in 2007. However, to seek legal citizenship at that time, Martin would have had to return to Mexico for one to ten years before he could apply for a visa and then a Green Card. The Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Act of 1996 (IIRIRA) enacted on September 30, 1996 created a significant change in immigration laws in the United States. The act stated that immigrants who entered the U.S. unlawfully for a total of 180-364 days must leave the U.S. and remain outside of the country for three years or obtain a pardon for their entrance. Any immigrants who stayed 365 days or longer in the U.S. without documented and legal permission had to leave the U.S. for ten years unless they were granted a waiver. If an immigrant in this position returned to the U.S. without the waiver, this person could not apply for the waiver for an additional ten years (Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996).

Martin waited ten years for this law to be reformed and could not leave the United States for years because of his responsibility to support his family and maintain a relationship with them. He shared stories of other friends who did return saying, "Some of my friends had to go back two years straight; they lost everything. Maybe they come legal now, but they have nothing and need to start all over again."

When this law was reformed, Martin saw an opportunity to continue the process for legal citizenship. He was able to complete the necessary return to Mexico and the other requirements in a two-week residency stay.

The Process

As an American citizen, Martin's wife shed great light on the process that this family endured in Martin's search for citizenship. She had to be part of this process and supported Martin on each step of this difficulty journey. He was able to qualify for a permanent resident card valid for ten years due to her American citizenship. Maria explained,

I had to be there with him on everything, at the lawyer's, and I had to petition for him. He could not be a U.S. citizen when we got married because after 9/11, the laws had changed and would not allow him to apply for U.S. residency due to the laws changing.

According to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS, 2017), marrying a United States citizen does not automatically grant citizenship to an immigrant in the U.S. The immigrant must file paperwork for a visa and then apply and be accepted for a Green Card to maintain documented and legal residency (USCIS, 2017). Martin could have applied for U.S. residency before 2015; however, he would have had to return to Mexico for the entire process taking anywhere from six months to three years (Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996). Martin did not want to take the chance of traveling to Mexico and being unable to return to his wife and three young children. Maria explained,

He did not want to do that because it would have been more of a burden on me. When Sophia was born, she had an immune deficiency, and she couldn't go to daycare, so I had to stay home with her and not go back to work or school, so he didn't want to leave us for that long.

Martin and Maria indicated that this process was one that was on-going from the time Martin entered the U.S. through the present. There was a constant worry of deportation that necessitated checking laws and finding a workable route for the family. To date, Martin's family has paid \$10,000 U.S. dollars to obtain legal residency for Martin. He had to contract an immigration lawyer, complete the paperwork packet provided to him, provide access to marriage and birth certificates, receipts of purchases the couple made together, and even photos from when they first started dating throughout their entire adult lives including pictures of their children as they grew. Martin and Maria also had to request letters in support of his residency from people who knew Martin, including letters from friends, family members, members of their church congregation, and employers/colleagues at Martin's previous and current places of employment. Once they received these letters, submitted Martin's application, and paid the necessary fees, Martin and Maria were dealt a great blow. Martin learned he also had to secure a U.S. citizen to become his immigration sponsor.

Martin and Maria had very different perceptions of the immigration process. When asked, Maria informed the researchers, "The process was long to me. I feel like the process is too long, and it's more about money than anything." When the researchers asked Martin to share something positive about the process, he replied,

Everything! The good time was every time we received a letter from Homeland Security. Every time we receive a letter, we know we do one more step closer. And the biggest one was when we received the appointment in Juarez from the U.S. Consulate to meet with them.

Martin shared the documents that merely informed him of the date and time of his interview with the researchers. He also reminisced about the misgivings he had:

When you open the envelope, I was like it is going to be a good thing or a bad thing. You don't know what was inside until you open it, but for us was everything positive and everything good, but there is a lot of people that they are denied and they have thirty days to leave the country voluntary or they will be deported.

Martin spent the first week of his residency stay in Mexico. Before Martin and his family left for Mexico, he had to have fingerprints taken and a background check conducted by the FBI so that they could ascertain that he had no terrorist connections or affiliations. After an extensive criminal record check was completed, Martin received his appointment in Mexico. As soon as he reached Mexican soil, Martin found that he had to go through the same process again for the Mexican government, “When you get your appointment over there, same thing again; fingerprints, background check, and medical exam, which you can only do at certified facilities from U.S. Consulate. You have to pay a fee for everything.” When asked to describe the day he had his appointment at the consulate to determine if he would be allowed to stay in the U.S. with his family or not, Martin became very emotional. Martin recalled that he got up the morning of his appointment, hugged his family, and then went to the meeting at the consulate. There were about thirty people in line ahead of him, and he could hear everyone’s interviews as he sat and waited for this turn. Martin recalled, “You see people come out happy from the office; you see people come out in tears.”

Support

Martin and Maria had a good support system as they endured the immigration process. Maria’s family was supportive and helped them in any way that they could. They also found a sponsor to support Martin in his quest for legal residency. However, Maria also saw a downside to having to rely on others for Martin’s legal residency. When asked about how she felt requesting letters and financial documents from friends and family, Maria responded,

Sometimes it was ok, as they knew his status here, but other times, I felt like a burden on them, some people didn’t want to do it, and then I had to tell everybody our business; it was embarrassing at times. I felt like it was personal and felt like it was harder on me because I was the one asking for this, but it may be that he just didn’t show it like me.

Martin also had the support of his lawyer who assisted the family with the legal process and documents. Maria shared, “The lawyers were great; I feel like if we didn’t have them, it would have been more stressful, longer, and harder. Some of the stuff we saw people show up with in Mexico, I felt bad for them; they had lawyers but weren’t organized and didn’t have everything they needed, but we did because our lawyers prepared us, so I feel like that is why we were successful; they were good people.”

Maria was also the one who secured Martin’s immigration sponsor. She was having a discussion with one of her friends in the spring of 2015 and mentioned that she was distraught because she could not find someone who would first agree and second qualify to be Martin’s sponsor. Maria shared, “We got to know who stood by us through the process and who didn’t.”

Sponsor. Before Martin could apply for legal residency, he had to obtain a sponsor who would support him in his immigration journey. The responsibility of the sponsor was to ensure that in the event Martin could not financially support himself that he would not take government assistance, but the sponsor would support him monetarily in the United States. To be a sponsor of an immigrant for legal residency in the U.S., the sponsor must meet criteria set forth by the U.S. Citizen and Immigration Services (USCIS). On their form I-864, the minimum income requirements of a sponsor are outlined according to the sponsor’s household size. According to the 2017 Poverty Guidelines (USCIS, 2017), the sponsor must earn at least 125% of the poverty guideline in income per year to qualify as an immigration sponsor. For Martin’s sponsor with a household of four people, the sponsor had to prove an income of no less than \$30,750 annually (USCIS, 2017). To prove this level of income and household size, Martin’s sponsor, Graciela Jimenez, had to provide three years of tax returns, proof of income, and a letter from her place of employment that stated how long the sponsor had been employed. “Basically, the sponsor has to show a great amount of stability and ability to support the person applying for citizenship.” “Beyond that, the sponsor has to sign legal documents stating that he or she will support the person they are sponsoring if they become unemployed so that the immigrant does not take any financial aid from the government such as food stamps or welfare.” Besides the promise of monetary support if needed, Martin’s sponsor assisted him and Maria as they wrote their letters for the immigration application and promised to help him study for his citizenship test when that time came.

Graciela commented on becoming Martin’s sponsor, “It is a huge responsibility. I feel good about it, but it can make me nervous as well.” Graciela did not take this responsibility lightly and even mentioned that she does not trust easily but felt that Martin and Maria were trustworthy and deserved a chance to continue their life together in the U.S. She also indicated,

I believe that this great country was built by immigrants. I mean all of our families were immigrants at one point—some just sooner than others. My family came to the U.S. as immigrants and travelled across the country in covered wagons one hundred and twenty years ago.

Why does this give me more right to be here than my hardworking friend who just wants a better life for his family and just wants to keep his family together? I believe it is my responsibility to help him attain his citizenship.

Costs

The Escamilla family has incurred great personal costs encompassing financial costs, time expenditures, effort, and cost to their emotional well-being. The process has taken a financial toll on the family in expending great time and effort to complete all of the necessary steps required for Martin to stay in the United States. Beyond monetary costs though, there have been both emotional and physical costs for each member of the family incurred by the grave amount of stress that they have endured throughout the ordeal. Each of the following subthemes investigated the costs sustained by Martin and his family in his search for legal residency. These are similar to other immigrants attempting to gain legal citizenship; however, each case can be quite different in terms of time, money, and expenditures.

Monetary costs. The Escamilla family has spent \$10,000 U.S. dollars to obtain legal residency for Martin. For a family of five on a one-salary income of \$40,000 per year, this expense was taxing on the family and a source of constant worry. The entire family made great sacrifices to be able to afford the lawyers and fees associated with this process. They had to travel back to Mexico and stay for two weeks while waiting on Martin's appointments. During his time in Mexico, Martin had to repeat his physicals and finger printing. In the U.S., these services cost anywhere from \$40 to \$100; however, in Mexico, the Escamilla family had to use certain approved facilities, and the physical alone cost \$500 American dollars. Maria conveyed the immense costs for them:

You could only use certain doctors that they chose. You are at their mercy, and it's hard because it is so expensive to make ends meet and pay all the fees while he is an undocumented person because his wages are not as high as if he had legal status. You have no control over the process, and it's a constant stressor for me.

When asked what would happen if Martin was deported, he responded,

My wife and my kids would live on the streets. She would not be able to support them. My wife would never live over there [Martin's native country]. Financially, I would probably be ok, because I know how to work, but inside, I wouldn't be able to handle it to be away from my family.

Martin also shared if he was deported, he would attempt to return to the United States by any means possible to return to his family, no matter the cost. Martin shared,

It is really dangerous trying to cross the border. I can try to come back to the U.S. again because of my wife and my babies. I don't care if I have to pay the price that a lot of people pay—that means die trying to get to the U.S.

Time and effort expenditures. Maxwell (2005) penned lines that reflect the value of time. This quote illustrates the costs the Escamilla family has endured in a poignant manner.

To know the value of one year... Ask the student who failed the final exam.

To know the value of one month... Ask the mother of a premature baby.

To know the value of one week... Ask the editor of a weekly newsmagazine.

To know the value of one day... Ask the wage earner who has six children.

To know the value of one hour... Ask the lovers who are waiting to meet.

To know the value of one minute... Ask the person who missed the plane.

To know the value of one second... Ask the person who survived the accident.

To know the value of one millisecond... Ask the Olympic silver medalist.

As Maxwell's quote illustrates, time is a precious commodity of which no one possesses enough. When considering what the process of legal immigration and residency has cost Martin, Maria, and their family, Maria responded, "Time, from the start of the process to getting his Green Card was two years." The participants described spending their time from 2013 to 2015 as going to the lawyer's office, writing letters, obtaining necessary documents from family and friends, gathering photos, and contacting previous employers. Martin's sponsor has also paid a personal price of time and effort throughout this process. When asked what this process has cost her, Graciela responded,

It has cost me some time; I have spent several hours gathering documents and writing letters on Martin's behalf, but I have not had to pay anything out of pocket. However, I will have to pay to help support the family if they ever need it, as he cannot take welfare, food stamps, or any other type of government aid. This is the part of the process that I don't think many people understand.

This process has also cost Martin time with his family that still resides in his native country. From the time that Martin crossed the border to the point he returned to complete his petition for residency, Martin had not seen his mother, brothers, cousins, aunts, or uncles for twenty years.

Martin paid this price and missed time with his extended family members so that he could remain with his wife and children. He feared that he would not be able to make it back to them if he returned to his native country. During his time away, he lost his father and one brother. He also remembered the difficult journey of crossing the border and was unsure if he could survive it again. Although it has been an extensive time-consuming process, Martin's family truly learned the value of a year, each day, and every moment together in a free country.

Judgment from the community. Maria indicated,

Americans are so quick to judge other countries, and we don't know; we haven't had to live their lives or know what they go through. Martin's own country is so corrupt; he already lived in a poor country, and I feel like how many other people tried to do it the right way and weren't able to, and so they chose the wrong way, but it was the best way to them to have a better or safer life. We see it as the wrong way, but to those people, it is about survival even though coming over that way is very hard. It is just a hard process, and I wouldn't want to have to go through that for a better life. I am lucky and blessed because I was born in this country.

Both Martin and Maria revealed they felt that the United States was built upon the backs of immigrants and questioned why it was so hard for Martin to attain legal citizenship now compared to other immigrants in generations past. Maria pondered,

If my ancestors didn't come over years ago, I wouldn't be here. I feel like people forget about Texas being Mexico once and the U.S. took it. When people think about immigrants, they just think about Mexico, but they don't think about other immigrants from all over, and they come over illegally as well. They don't take into consideration that down the line somewhere their family immigrated maybe from England or somewhere else, and that's not fair.

Treatment by others. Martin discussed the treatment he has encountered by others as an undocumented immigrant and as a legal resident. While many people have supported him and treated him well; he has experienced prejudice and condescension. He has been called an *illegal* and when asked how this made him feel, he replied, "Sad." Martin further explained that undocumented immigrants are the ones harvesting fields by hand no matter what the weather is like. If there is an order due, they fill it. He also shared that he has known countless times where undocumented immigrants were turned in to Border Patrol or a local Sheriff a day or two before payday so that the employer did not have to pay them for one to two weeks of work. The workers would be deported, the employer received two weeks of free labor, and then the employer could get new help and continue the cycle.

Opportunities—and Lack Thereof

Throughout the study, Martin and Maria shared their beliefs that conditions in the United States offered them opportunities, whereas they cited subpar living conditions in Martin's home country as one of the main necessities of obtaining legal residency and remaining in the United States. Maria cautioned others to not judge immigrants for wanting to enter the U.S. for a better life. In both Maria's letter on behalf of Martin and his letter of petition to Homeland Security for legal residency, both participants discussed the dire need for quality medical care and education. Their eldest daughter, Sophia, was born with an autoimmune deficiency that negated any type of childcare or daycare, so Maria could not work outside of the home. They needed quality health care for this child that could not be maintained in Martin's home country. Their second child, Mia, sees a speech therapist due to a speech impediment, and this opportunity is only available to them in the U.S. Additionally, both Maria and Martin had health issues that required consistent, quality care.

Maria and Martin also cited the need for quality education for their three children: Sophia, Mia, and Adan. In Martin's home country, there is public education; however, they did not see this as a viable option for their children as the public education there is substandard. Students have to purchase books and food each day at the schools, and there are not many regulations or support for students in this country's school system. Mia has been identified as Gifted and Talented and has special learning needs due to the way she learns. Private schools are an option in Martin's home country; however, these are very expensive and would not be possible for Sophia, Mia, and Adan to attend private school due to the costs. Both Mia and Sophia also take ballet lessons and perform in the *Nutcracker Ballet* each winter and the musical *Texas* each summer. Without Martin's support or having to move out of the country would negate the possibility of the girls being able to participate in activities such as these.

There has also been a lack of opportunity for other members of Martin's family. Maria has attempted to enroll in college courses, as she desires to work in a helping profession such as nursing or some kind of pediatrics. She has been denied financial aid twice due to her husband's residency status, so even though Maria is a legal U.S. citizen, she has not had the same opportunities for education and advancement as other U.S. citizens.

Cycle. An interesting subtheme that emerged from available opportunities included the idea of the cycle of illegal immigration. Martin considered this by drawing an imaginary circle with his finger and discussed the issues of opportunities in the U.S. versus the lack of them in his home country. He shared his thoughts on this cycle by stating,

Your uncle is in the U.S.; you are ready to work and you want to own a car or truck; that is why you come to the United States. They [immigrants] are tired of wearing ugly boots with holes all over the place. You just want something nice for yourself. You are tired of not even having ten dollars to buy ice cream with a good looking girl, people come and go back.

Martin described many people that he has known cross into the United States to make enough money to purchase a vehicle, get married, and have enough to begin a family. However, the cycle continues as Martin described, “And then one way or another, the story starts again (he draws the imaginary circle), they just have so much money to do so much, and the kids always want more, and then another uncle or cousin is in the U.S., so they [younger generations] try to come.”

When asked why Martin wanted to become a U.S. citizen, Maria stated, “He wants citizenship because he loves this country and a lot more things are organized here; it is less corrupt. He [Martin] knows Mexico has become really bad; he has spent more years here, and doesn’t know anything more but here.”

When asked if Martin felt more like an American, Mexican, or a combination of both, he paused for a very long time considering and then responded, “I feel like American. I been fighting hard for this country to come and have what I have. If I become a USA citizen, they can never take me away from my family.”

Implications

This qualitative case study highlights the immigration process of one man’s journey of entering the United States as an undocumented immigrant twenty years ago. From the dangerous crossing of the frigid Rio Grande River between Mexico and the United States, experiencing the agonizing process of obtaining an H1B legal status no matter the costs, to the final acquisition of an elusive Green Card, the primary participant and his family bravely embraced the fervent hope that one-day he, like his family, would become an American citizen.

The findings of the study resulted in three universal, overarching themes of Martin Escamilla’s journey to citizenship that included the arduous crossing over into the United States from his birth country, the agonizing process that he encountered to obtain legal residency status, the overwhelming personal and familial costs, and the constant threat of deportation that he and his family endured. The journey incurred escalating impact upon Escamilla’s personal, family, and community experiences that concentrically became embedded within the diverse fabric of the larger society. Findings indicated that the struggles and hopes experienced by one man in his life’s journey toward citizenship might be representative of struggles faced by all men in their journeys toward freedom and a better life.

The results of the study signify the mythological plight of the American Dream. For one young man born in another country to hope and dream that he and his family may aspire one day to live a life of freedom and liberty in America, without the ever-present threat of a dangerous cartel governing his life choices and even his very life. Martin Escamilla was willing to risk the loss of all to escape the tyranny of a corrupt government and dire poverty to venture upon a journey that may eventually take him to a brighter future and a better tomorrow for himself, for his family, and for his newly adopted country. For Martin, the American Dream remains intact.

The implications of the study highlight the unofficial motto of the United States that celebrates *E Pluribus Unum*, “out of many, one.” In the political heat or societal temperature that currently exists in the United States, men like Escamilla who come from many places around the globe simply yearning to be free to build a life in the warmth of freedom and self-determination face overwhelming obstacles and untold suffering in their journey to citizenship. The findings and implications of the study present unique perspectives of the arduous journey to citizenship that one man and his family experienced. One of the most impactful of these implications derived from this study was that illegal immigration is cyclical in nature.

Conclusion

Strong border security and keeping Americans safe from terrorism remains an impetus for the United States; however, there are many misconceptions about the role undocumented immigrants play in society today. This group of people referred to as “illegals” can be a hurtful and degrading label for those who are merely seeking a better life for themselves and their families. Very few crimes define who a person is, yet immigrants entering the U.S. without proper documentation are met with hostility and labels. Admittedly, entering the United States without going through the proper channels is an illegal act; however, many immigrants in dire situations feel they have no other recourse and cannot wait decades or pay tens of thousands of dollars to go through the proper channels.

As illustrated in this research study, there is a constant pendulum swing of laws dependent upon the political party that holds power, so many times immigrants attempting to go through the process are caught in the midst of transitions and unexpected changes. As the research findings indicate, this article does not intend to persuade others to accept illegal immigration or to encourage open borders with no checks and balances. The goal of the researchers is to shed light on the plight of millions of undocumented people who have lived most of their lives in the United States. This group of immigrants has no other place to go because they or their parents felt it necessary to flee their home countries for America by any means possible. Additionally the researchers hope that this study calls to attention the inconsistencies within the immigration process. Let this be a clarion call for immigration reform to include a clear and equitable process that does not take decades or thousands of dollars to complete. May U.S. citizens see past the often-desperate acts of survival and begin to treat undocumented immigrants as people and not as criminals. As researchers and American citizens, this study promulgates the hope that this singular case study be transferrable to other cases of other immigrants by highlighting similar perspectives of people within the citizenship process during the current sociopolitical climate.

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