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REVIEWED BY

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UT School of Public Health San Antonio,
United States
Eva Wikström,
Umeå University, Sweden

*CORRESPONDENCE

Alessandra Bazo Vienrich
✉ abazovienrich@ric.edu

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Safeguarding research with undocumented communities: ethics, risks, and responsibilities

Alessandra Bazo Vienrich*

Department of Sociology, Rhode Island College, Providence, RI, United States

Drawing on more than a decade of research on undocumented immigration, this article advances methodological considerations and practices designed to safeguard vulnerable populations. Framed as both a response to the current U.S. sociopolitical climate and a call for methodological reflexivity, it urges researchers of undocumented migration to reexamine their approaches to risk assessment. The goal is to promote research practices that minimize harm and prioritize protection for undocumented participants. The article outlines three key areas of practice: using risk assessment to protect undocumented populations, extending considerations to safeguard the researcher, and determining what to do when the risks outweigh the benefits. Through these methodological innovations, I advocate for research processes that center undocumented immigrants' safety and dignity at every stage of inquiry. Ultimately, this work interrogates whether the potential benefits of studying undocumented populations justify the risks they bear. I draw on my own experiences as a formerly undocumented, DACA benefited immigrant, now navigating the field from a position of relative legal privilege.

KEYWORDS

Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), methods, migration, reflexivity, undocumented immigrants

Introduction

Ethical research requires a continual balancing of risks and benefits, guided by the principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. For undocumented immigrant communities, this balance is never static; it shifts with the broader sociopolitical climate. During periods of intensified immigration enforcement and policing, the risks associated with participation—such as surveillance, exposure to immigration authorities, re-traumatization, and community distrust—are amplified. Under such conditions, what may typically be considered “minimal risk” research can no longer be assumed to be minimal. The potential harms of participation may outweigh the benefits, both for individuals and their communities (Block et al., 2013; Peled and Leichtentritt, 2002). Researchers and Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) therefore bear an added responsibility to reassess whether the knowledge gained justifies these risks. In some cases, the ethical course of action may be to delay, redesign, or forego a study until conditions no longer endanger participants.

Over the past 25 years, migration scholars have advanced deep insights into how precarious legal status intersects with race (Golash-Boza, 2010; Golash-Boza and Valdez, 2018; Valdez and Golash-Boza, 2020), class (Ribas, 2016; Schmalzbauer, 2014), place (Jones, 2013, 2019; Marrow, 2011), and immigrant generation (Cebulko and Silver, 2016) to shape undocumented immigrants' life trajectories (Abrego, 2011; Coutin, 2000; Coutin, 2003; De Genova, 2004; Massey and Capoferro, 2004; Menjivar, 2011a, 2011b). Diverse methodological

approaches—ethnographic, interview-based, and mixed methods—have deepened our understanding of how undocumented status affects labor, education, health, and encounters with the immigration enforcement apparatus. Qualitative studies have humanized the undocumented experience (Canizales, 2024; Escudero, 2020; García, 2019; Gonzales, 2016; Gomberg-Muñoz, 2010; Gomez Cervantes, 2025; Negrón-Gonzales, 2014; Rodriguez and Macias, 2023; Van Natta, 2023), while ethnographers have expanded research beyond traditional immigrant gateways such as California, New York, and Texas (Arriaga, 2023; Cabaniss, 2016; Cebulko, 2013, 2014, 2025; Gill, 2018; Mares, 2019; Rodriguez, 2025; Schmalzbauer, 2014; Silver, 2012) to emerging undocumented destinations (Meloni, 2023). Interview studies have illuminated how undocumented immigrants experience structural inequality and navigate incorporation across institutions and intimate relationships (Enriquez, 2017; Delgado, 2022; Gleeson and Gonzales, 2012; Patler et al., 2019; Nienhusser et al., 2016; Pila, 2016).

Mixed-methods and quantitative research have further captured the demographic and psychosocial dimensions of undocumented life. The National UnDACAmented Research Project (NURP) examined the impact of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) on education and well-being (Gonzales and Bautista-Chavez, 2014), while the California DACA Study and the California Health Interview Survey (CHIS) have traced the effects of legal status on health and mental health outcomes (Patler et al., 2019). Studies during the COVID-19 pandemic documented how undocumented status shapes respondents' willingness to identify themselves for contact tracing (Galletly et al., 2021). Together, these contributions have broadened the empirical foundation of migration studies and expanded our understanding of how legality operates as a social determinant of inequality.

Yet, as this body of research has grown, so too have the ethical stakes. Scholars increasingly acknowledge the need to integrate robust human-subjects protections tailored to the vulnerabilities of undocumented communities (Jach et al., 2020; Jauhiainen and Tedeschi, 2021). Because undocumented populations are heterogeneous—varying by country of origin, racial and linguistic identities, and migration histories—ethical practices must reflect this diversity. The influx of indigenous and Afro-Latinx immigrants from Latin America (Bazo Vienrich, 2019; López Oro, 2022) underscores the necessity of culturally grounded, context-specific protections. Ensuring both safety and dignity for undocumented participants requires that IRBs and researchers avoid reproducing otherness or vulnerability narratives (Lahman et al., 2011).

Over the last decade, the escalation of immigration enforcement has made life increasingly precarious for undocumented immigrants, even in states once considered hospitable, such as Massachusetts (Cebulko, 2013, 2014, 2025). This environment complicates researchers' ability to build and sustain partnerships with community organizations that historically facilitated recruitment. Distrust and fear have grown amid doubts about confidentiality protections, especially in a context where subpoena powers may expose sensitive research data (Bloemraad and Menjivar, 2022; Lahman et al., 2011; Torres Stone et al., 2024). The courts themselves can no longer be assumed to be neutral arbiters of justice for immigrant communities (American Immigration Council, 2025). Under these conditions, achieving a balance between ethical research and participant dignity is increasingly difficult.

A methodology of care—anchored in beneficence, justice, and respect—is thus essential to counteract the harms that can arise in research with undocumented populations. This article advances such

a methodology by emphasizing risk assessment as a key ethical tool. I propose that mindful risk assessment will help researchers determine when and how to proceed responsibly and, when necessary, to redirect inquiry toward less vulnerable populations. One such approach involves studying what I call undocumented-adjacent proxies—teachers, counselors, and service providers who work closely with undocumented individuals, but are not themselves undocumented. This approach preserves the integrity of research while minimizing risk for undocumented participants. Finally, I argue that researchers' positionalities—especially those who are formerly undocumented or DACA-beneficiaries—can deepen methodological reflexivity and inform more ethically grounded decision-making (Abrego and Negrón-Gonzales, 2020; Bazo Vienrich, 2018; Bazo Vienrich, 2021; Reyna Rivarola and López, 2021). For those who do not share this legal status, reflexivity must move beyond a perfunctory gesture and directly engage the power dynamics inherent in legal precarity.

In what follows, I outline three interrelated considerations for a more humanistic and ethically attuned approach to researching undocumented immigrants in the 21st century: (1) Using risk assessment to protect undocumented populations, (2) Extending considerations to protect the researcher, and (3) Determining when the risks outweigh the benefits. Collectively, these practices invite scholars to conduct research that safeguards both participants and researchers amid the evolving realities of immigration enforcement.

Using risk assessment to protect undocumented populations

Research involving undocumented immigrants has long posed ethical and safety challenges (Coutin, 2003; Menjivar, 2011a, 2011b). During periods of intensified immigration enforcement, these risks increase dramatically. Researchers and Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) must therefore reconsider whether the potential knowledge gained justifies the potential harm. In some cases, the most ethical choice may be to delay, redesign, or even forego a study until participants can be adequately safeguarded. This includes researchers taking precautions to minimize physical, emotional, and legal consequences potentially incurred by participants.

When I began researching the experiences of undocumented college students soon after the announcement of DACA in 2012, I was acutely aware of these risks. Having learned about foundational cases of researchers who were subpoenaed to release their data, I grappled with whether I would be willing to risk imprisonment to protect my participants' confidentiality (Bloemraad and Menjivar, 2022). As a DACA-benefited graduate student studying college students of the same legal status, I felt a moral responsibility to safeguard those whose vulnerabilities mirrored my own. The thought of betraying their trust was unthinkable. Yet, as someone without permanent legal status, defying a court subpoena could have resulted in my deportation. Ultimately, the relative protections DACA offered—particularly the deferral of deportation—allowed me to move forward with my research.

Many of the same ethical challenges I faced over a decade ago persist today, and the conclusions I drew then may no longer hold under current conditions. While my U.S. citizenship constitutionally protects me from deportation, the erosion of DACA and the growing targeting of immigrants—including those with other liminal legal

statuses, asylum claims, and even permanent residency—alters the risk–benefit calculus of conducting research with non-citizen immigrant populations. Risks arise in three primary areas: participant recruitment, anonymity, and data security. Because the undocumented constitute a vulnerable and hard-to-reach population, their welfare and agency must be considered during each moment in the research process (Block et al., 2013; Peled and Leichtenritt, 2002). The reliance of researchers on community partners or trusted intermediaries for recruitment may help ameliorate these risks and offer an opportunity to empower both the population of study and partner organizations (Peled and Leichtenritt, 2002). In the current climate, however, many immigrant-serving organizations are overwhelmed and may lack the capacity to assist researchers. Not only can this hinder the benefits reaped by participants, but for early-career scholars and graduate students without established relationships in these communities, recruitment may be especially difficult, prompting the need for alternative strategies.

To safeguard anonymity, researchers should avoid collecting identifiable information (such as names, addresses, or school IDs) unless absolutely necessary. Data security protocols—such as encrypted storage, password protection, and restricted access—are essential (All European Academies (ALLEA), 2023). Researchers must also consider the physical safety of research spaces, ensuring that interviews or surveys occur in secure, private locations rather than government-affiliated or institutional settings. On public university campuses, this may involve identifying rooms designated as private spaces that cannot be accessed without invitation. When in-person safety cannot be guaranteed, remote or virtual participation may provide a safer alternative.

Ethical practice also requires viewing informed consent as an ongoing process rather than a one-time formality. Special attention to the challenges associated with consent modalities (i.e., oral, written, electronic), as well as the language consent is administered in, and the difficulty of the language used in informed consent, are critical elements of initial and continuing consent (Persson and Wilström, 2025). Revisiting consent throughout a project allows researchers to update participants on emerging risks—such as enforcement surges—and confirm continued willingness to participate. Doing so will advance an understanding of social suffering that begins with researchers acknowledging their limitations in adequately capturing this sociocultural experience (Wilkinson, 2004). To further minimize visibility, researchers should limit or avoid audio and video recording, employ voice-distortion technology, and use pseudonyms or composite narratives when disseminating findings.

Finally, a community-centered ethics approach can serve as a foundation to ensure that research benefits flow back to participants and their communities. Collaborating with community advisors or undocumented advocates in research design and dissemination decisions strengthens trust and accountability. Sharing findings in accessible and beneficial ways—rather than limiting them to academic audiences—embodies the principle of reciprocity and situates ethical responsibility as relational, not simply procedural.

Reflecting on my own experiences, I have come to see that my liminal legal status made the idea of defying a court subpoena untenable—it could have landed me in detention and led to deportation. Although I never faced that scenario, I later realized that I had been asking the wrong question. Instead of asking whether I could protect my participants, a more urgent question emerged: *how can I minimize the risks inherent in studying this population at all?* This question led me to consider how proxy populations—teachers, counselors, and

others who work closely with undocumented students—might serve as “undocumented-adjacent” sources of knowledge, allowing researchers to address similar questions while reducing harm to directly affected individuals.

Extending considerations to protect the researcher

Throughout the 6 years I spent interviewing undocumented students in North Carolina and Massachusetts, I was often struck by the parallels between my participants’ experiences and my own. Much of my data collection occurred while I was a DACA beneficiary, and like many of the students I interviewed, I had navigated high school under the constant anxiety that my dreams could be derailed by my legal status. Unlike most of them, however, I had educational privileges and forms of social and cultural capital that eased my access to higher education. Recognizing this privilege often filled me with guilt and forced me to confront the emotional and psychological costs of doing research as someone who shared experiences of exclusion. While my doctoral program and committee were supportive, I lacked institutional resources to process the re-traumatization, mental health toll, and eventual burnout that accompanied this work.

These experiences underscore the importance of establishing safeguards for the mental, emotional, physical, and legal well-being of researchers, particularly those navigating precarious legality themselves. Anticipating re-traumatization from revisiting personal or community histories of exclusion can help researchers plan appropriate forms of support. The dynamics of “coming out” as undocumented reveal that self-disclosure can be a source of re-traumatization, empowerment and even joy, thus requiring careful consideration (Bazo Vienrich, 2021; Reyna Rivarola and López, 2021; Santa-Ramirez and Hall, 2023). Researchers must not only weigh the personal costs and benefits of disclosure, but the potential burden of knowing researchers’ legal status for participants. To ameliorate these emotional demands, access to therapy, peer support groups, and mentorship from scholars with similar experiences is critical. Setting clear boundaries around personal disclosure—both in interviews and in writing—can also mitigate emotional exhaustion and preserve professionalism (see Bazo Vienrich, 2018; Bazo Vienrich and Torres Stone, 2022).

Institutional protections are equally crucial, especially for researchers whose research agenda may be considered a liability for institutions aiming to avoid undue attention. Universities must provide researchers with access to legal counsel, mental health services, and security measures appropriate to their level of risk. In the absence of these forms of support, faculty researchers may turn to national organizations such as, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), Faculty First Responders (FFR), and professional associations, for resources and best practices to facilitate conversations with administrators to secure these provisions. Graduate student and faculty unions, when present, can also be important sources of legal and emotional support. Researchers should remain aware that visibility in community spaces—such as protests, meetings, or field sites—may increase exposure to surveillance or enforcement and must weigh these risks carefully.

Positionality also shapes the ethical and emotional landscape of research. As I transitioned from DACA recipient to permanent resident during my final years of fieldwork, I confronted new complexities

in how participants perceived me—sometimes as an insider, sometimes as an outsider with newfound privilege. Transparency about one's legal status and the limits of shared experience can help researchers manage their expectations and emotional strain. Strategies such as taking scheduled breaks, avoiding triggering environments, and pacing dissemination timelines are useful to further protect researchers from burnout. Collaborating with co-researchers can distribute labor and provide mutual emotional support.

Finally, advocating for institutional recognition of researcher risk is essential. Communicating with IRBs about potential threats—not only to participants but also to researchers—can prompt more comprehensive protections. Requests for mental health resources, legal support, and security planning should be viewed as integral components of ethical, IRB-approved research.

Determining when the risks outweigh the benefits

My earlier research with undocumented Latinx college students provided an intimate view of what it means to be both Latinx and undocumented in an increasingly anti-immigrant national context. Through interviews, I learned that high school counselors often played pivotal roles in shaping students' access to college. As the 2016 Presidential election threatened DACA's survival and further destabilized the lives of those who relied on it, I began to question whether continued research directly involving undocumented students was ethically defensible. Shifting my focus to legally privileged institutional agents—specifically high school counselors whose advice profoundly shapes undocumented students' educational trajectories—allowed me to balance two commitments: safeguarding undocumented communities while continuing to produce research that illuminates their lived experiences (Attia et al., 2023; Groce and Johnson, 2021; Kam et al., 2018; Lauby and Ross, 2022).

This pivot marked a methodological adaptation guided by risk assessment. Studying high school counselors—who occupy a less vulnerable social position yet wield significant influence over undocumented students' futures—enabled me to examine systemic barriers without contributing to the fatigue, extraction, or exposure that undocumented individuals increasingly face. By focusing on “undocumented-adjacent” proxies, I could investigate the structures that constrain undocumented youth while minimizing harm to the community itself. With research questions such as, *how do counselors describe the factors that enable or constrain their ability to accurately advise undocumented students?* and *How do counselors perceive their role in shaping undocumented students' postsecondary educational opportunities?*, I turned my attention to high school counselors in Massachusetts, where years earlier I conducted part of my interviews with undocumented students and where roughly 8,000 undocumented students graduate from high school each year. Most of these students identify as Latinx/Hispanic, while 84% of their high school counselors in the state identify as white. This demographic gap raised critical questions about how differences in race, ethnicity, and legal status awareness shape advising relationships. Through a mixed-methods approach—combining a statewide web-survey and in-depth interviews—I explored how counselors understood their roles in advising undocumented students, how they perceived the systemic challenges undocumented students face, as well as how their

perception of their roles in shaping undocumented students' postsecondary opportunities, shaped the advice they offer undocumented students.

While my interviews with undocumented college students in Massachusetts took place between 2014 and 2018, the counselor study began in 2024 amid a markedly different political landscape. Heightened enforcement and the intensification of anti-immigrant sentiment prompted me to reconsider my ethical obligations. I found that studying those adjacent to undocumented life—teachers, counselors, and other institutional agents—could generate equally valuable insights into undocumented students' experiences while substantially reducing the risks of surveillance, re-traumatization, and exposure for undocumented participants themselves. Examples of insights gained from studying counselors who work with undocumented students include how a lack of consistency around in-state tuition for undocumented immigrants, coupled with varying degrees of counselor knowledge and an absence of training about state-level tuition policies and the unique circumstances of legally precarious immigrant youth, leaves gaps in the information and support undocumented students receive from high school counselors. These valuable insights suggest that risk assessment can not only be a protective tool, but a methodological compass, guiding the shift from direct to proxy research. Recognizing when the risks outweigh the benefits requires researchers to ask difficult questions: Whose safety is being prioritized? Who bears the consequences of our pursuit of knowledge? In certain contexts, the most ethical and liberatory act may be to redirect inquiry toward those in positions of power, allowing scholars to critique systems that constrain undocumented life without endangering those who live it.

Conclusion

Accustomed from a young age to charting my own educational path—often as the only Latina or undocumented immigrant—I learned to navigate institutions largely on my own. Only through reflexivity did I realize how vital counseling, peer support, and spaces for processing mental and physical health would have been along the way. Engaging reflexivity during data analysis revealed that my trajectory was shaped by privileges relative to my participants, as well as by the historical contingencies of timing and mentorship that helped open doors for me. These experiences—the barriers I faced as an undocumented student and the advantages I held in comparison to my participants—anchor the analysis and underscore the necessity of methodological reflexivity.

Possessing first-order knowledge afforded me credibility and access to a population often beyond reach of researchers (Green and Lageson, 2018). In places like North Carolina, where immigrants are harshly criminalized, establishing trust with undocumented students is extraordinarily difficult, and such challenges have intensified even in states that were once considered hospitable. My positionality facilitated recruitment but also complicated how my work was perceived. Conducting qualitative research within my “own” community invited questions about objectivity in a discipline that often privileges quantitative, ostensibly neutral approaches. Writing this project required balancing vulnerability and analytic rigor—bringing my whole self to the narrative while honoring the voices of those whose stories I carried.

In reflecting on this process, I have come to see that insider research entails both privilege and harm. To study undocumented populations is to be open to vulnerability and the potential for harm to this group is

great (Brown, 2021). To do this as an insider profoundly heightens the emotional toll and trauma of revisiting shared experiences. These insights reinforce my argument that, at times, the safest and most ethical approach is to study those who hold power over undocumented communities rather than undocumented people themselves. Ultimately, engaging the question “Do the benefits outweigh the risks?” must remain central to any ethical research design. Not only must beneficence to wider society be at the forefront of research considerations, but so too must the immediate benefit to participants (Brown, 2021; Burawoy, 1998). By foregrounding risk assessment, care, and reflexivity, researchers can advance knowledge that protects safety, dignity, and well-being—both of participants and those who study them.

Data availability statement

Any data presented in this article are not readily available because of Institutional Review Board requirements for confidentiality. Further inquiries should be directed to the corresponding author ABV, abazovienrich@ric.edu.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by Lehigh University IRB, University of Massachusetts Boston IRB, Rhode Island College IRB. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

ABV: Methodology, Writing – review & editing, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization, Writing – original draft.

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