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Assigning a Guardian: Family Separation Planning among Undocumented Immigrants With US Citizen Children

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ASSIGNING A GUARDIAN: FAMILY SEPARATION PLANNING AMONG UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRANTS WITH US (UNITED STATES) CITIZEN CHILDREN

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by

Maryam Rafieifar

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To: Dean Tomás R. Guilarte
Robert Stempel College of Public Health and Social Work

This dissertation, written by Maryam Rafieifar, and entitled Assigning a Guardian: Family Separation Planning among Undocumented Immigrants with US (United States) Citizen Children, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this dissertation and recommend that it be approved.

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The dissertation of Maryam Rafieifar is approved.

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

ASSIGNING A GUARDIAN: FAMILY SEPARATION PLANNING AMONG UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRANTS WITH US (UNITED STATES) CITIZEN CHILDREN

by

Maryam Rafieifar

Florida International University, 2022

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Professor Miriam Potocky, Major Professor

Custody of children in the event of family separation is one of the significant issues that needs to be addressed in the preparation process. Some parents make arrangements to delegate the legal guardianship of their children to another person so that if they ever get deported, they would not lose ties with their children. Using a qualitative design, this dissertation has explored the undocumented parents' decision to choose a guardian for their US citizen children in preparation for possible future family separation. It also looked at how the parents communicate such decision and their immigration status with their children. To answer these questions, 27 individuals who delegated their children's guardianship to the leader of a community organization were interviewed.

The findings showed parents' long-term exposure to traumatic experiences before, during, and after migration to the United States. The cumulated disadvantage and long-term stress resulted in uncertainty, constant fear of immigration enforcement and family separation, and distrust in the government. Therefore when they became aware of the guardianship option available in the community, they considered it seriously. Community's trust, the long history of successful family reunification cases, the

organizations' resources, and other types of assistance the families received were the reasons they concluded guardianship a viable option. These findings were confirmed by seven volunteers and staff members at the organization.

Children's knowledge of their parents' immigration status and consequently their guardianship decision depended on children's age, their experience of immigration enforcement, and their immigration status. The reasons for not communicating the immigration status and guardianship decision with the children were children's inability to comprehend and silence to protect them. Communications about legal status were around travel limitations, future plans, children's fears, worries, and efforts to decriminalize being undocumented. Communications about guardianship focused on introducing the guardian as a trusted person to whom the children could go if anything happened to them and the possibility of living with others. However, most did not provide details on their conversation.

This dissertation has direct implications for the child welfare and immigration fields. It explains how these families engage resources, cope, and prepare for possible immigration crises that might negatively impact their children. The translational objective of this research is to inform the development and implementation of evidence-based programs designed to mitigate the traumatic impact of immigration enforcement on children's mental and emotional health.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Around 5.9 million US citizen children have at least one undocumented family member, often a parent, in the same household (American Immigration Council, 2018). These children possess birthright citizenship and, as such, are entitled to its attendant rights (US Const. amend. XIV, § 1,1868), but their parents are not entitled to the same rights and therefore, if undocumented, could be subject to deportation (Zayas & Bradlee, 2014). US citizen children living in these families are affected by the deportability of their parents and sometimes their siblings. For these children, parental deportation or detention is a serious threat and can affect their physical, emotional, and developmental well-being (Allen et al., 2015; Brabeck et al., 2016; Fomby & Cherlin, 2004; Gallo, 2014; Gelatt, 2016; Gulbas & Zayas, 2017; Landale et al., 2015; Martínez et al., 2018; Patler & Laster Pirtle, 2018; Rojas-Flores et al., 2017; Vargas, 2015; Xu & Brabeck, 2012; Yoshikawa, 2011). The stability of the family would be at risk, and the family might endure economic hardship as a result of the removal of a working family member (Rugh & Hall, 2016; Wurfel-Delsid, 2014). In some cases, when parents have been deported or detained, children may be placed in the foster care system (Wessler, 2011). Moreover, children's education might be disrupted, disrupting their developmental progression (Gallo, 2014; Shreffler et al., 2018; Yoshikawa, 2011).

When parents of US citizen children are ordered removed, they often have to make a difficult decision. Choices are to either leave their children behind in the care of relatives or the child welfare system or take them to their countries of origin, which often the children may have never known. Both of these two choices have implications for the healthy growth and development of children or, as Luis Zayas (2015) puts it, makes the

children either “immigration orphans or American exiles” (p. 27). Suppose the parents decide to take the children with them. In that case, the children will be deprived of the advantages of living in a developed country like the United States and enjoying better educational, social, and health care services (Zayas & Bradlee, 2014). They will have to adapt to a new educational system, lose their peer support, become socially isolated, and often have to learn a new language (González et al., 2016; Hernández-León et al., 2020). Zayas et al. (2015) documented that children who go with their parents experience a great level of emotional distress and difficulties. Children who remain in the US without their parents also experience psychological distress and sometimes trauma (Zayas, 2015). Often, they must live with other people, such as relatives and friends, and sometimes they end up in the care of the child welfare system. In 2011, more than 5,100 US citizen children lived in foster care after a parent’s detention or deportation (Wessler, 2011; Women’s Refugee Commission, 2014). Sometimes, a lack of coordination between child welfare and immigration enforcement systems leads to protracted separation and, in some cases, might cause termination of parental rights[1] (Xu, 2005). Although both choices have their limitations, the parents must decide which one of these two options is in the best interest of their children (Zayas & Bradlee, 2014). Numerous factors impact this decision: the age of the child, having support networks both in the US and in their countries of origin, the immigration status of other family members, and prospects in the countries of origin (Zayas, 2015).

[1] Federal law mandates that parental rights be terminated if a child has been out of a parent’s custody for 15 of the past 22 months (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016).

As the federal and local governments practice stricter immigration enforcement, many undocumented parents decide to assign a guardian for their citizen children, often a citizen relative (Generations United, 2018). So if they got deported, they would not lose ties with their children (Cooke & Rosenberg, 2017; Sacchetti, 2017). Many immigrant rights advocates and legal advisors also recommend mixed-status families to be prepared for possible arrest and deportation of their undocumented family members and make arrangements for the care of their children (Baum, 2017; ILRC, n.d.; Otterstrom, n.d.).

The decision to give up or share the custody of a child with a third party in the context of governmental threat is not a new phenomenon. For example, during the Spanish civil war in the 1930s, many Republican, Communist, and Marxist families sent their children to other countries like Britain, the Soviet Union, and France out of fear of Franco's nationalist troops (Davies, 2011; Tejerizo, 2005). Otherwise, the Franco regime would separate the children from their Republican parents and put them under the state's custody (Morcillo, 2014). After the war, children in western Europe started to repatriate, but those who went to the Soviet Union were unable to reunite with their families until after the death of Stalin.

A similar example is when some Jewish families in Europe hid their children with Gentile families for fear of identification by the Nazis from 1942 to 1945 (Bloeme Evers-Emden, 2007; Vromen, 2008). Then, too, parents' decision to hide their children was not easy for several reasons. They did not know whether the stranger family would care for their children or how much the children would suffer from this separation. Those parents who survived the Holocaust faced challenges tracing their children after the war. Reunions with the children also proved challenging as many younger children thought

that their temporary caregivers were their birth parents, and the older children forgot their real names (Bloeme Evers-Emden, 2007).

Another example is "operation Pedro Pan" in the 1960s. It was jointly organized by the US State Department and Catholic Charities of Miami to help Cuban families send their children to the United States (Maret & Aschkenas, 2011). About 14,000 unaccompanied Cuban children were flown to Miami by that operation, and most children were soon united with their families. More recently, in the 1980s and 1990s, many Chinese families put up their female children for adoption to families from other countries for fear of China's one-child policy (Gann, 2008; Johnson, 2016).

All these examples have two things in common: first, the parents gave the custody and care of their children to another person for fear of consequences of a major policy issue; second, they all did that in the belief that this decision was in their children's best interest. Today, too, the undocumented immigrants who fear possible separation from their children for stricter immigration enforcement actions make arrangements to delegate the guardianship of their children to others.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this exploratory study is to provide a narrative of the experience of undocumented parents about determining a guardian for their citizen children in preparation for possible future deportation or separation. To not lose their children to the child welfare system, some undocumented parents delegate legal guardianship of their children to another person with legal status. This study explores how the parents come to such a decision, how they communicate it with their children, and how they have prepared them for possible future separation.

Rationale of the Study

Despite the long history of controversies around the issue of citizen children of undocumented immigrants and the growing size of their population, nearly six million, this population has not been very well researched. Previous studies on US citizen children have primarily focused on documenting the negative impacts of immigration enforcement actions on US citizen children's mental health (Allen et al., 2015; Gulbas & Zayas, 2017; Hanna, 2017; Hwang Koo, 2017; Landale et al., 2015; Martínez et al., 2018; Patler & Laster Pirtle, 2018; Rojas-Flores et al., 2017), access to services (Castañeda & Melo, 2014; Fomby & Cherlin, 2004; Gelatt, 2016; Patler & Laster Pirtle, 2018; Slayter & Križ, 2015; E. D. Vargas, 2015; Vargas & Pirog, 2016; E. Vargas & Ybarra, 2017; Xu & Brabeck, 2012), their healthy growth and development (K. M. Brabeck, Sibley, & Lykes, 2016; Gallo, 2014; Shreffler et al., 2018; Yoshikawa, 2011), and economic stability (Rugh & Hall, 2016; Wurfel-Delsid, 2014). However, few studies have examined their resilience and how the families prepare for an uncertain future affected by immigration enforcement actions (Balderas et al., 2016; Berger Cardoso et al., 2018; Philbin & Ayón, 2016). In other words, the existing literature has been very much focused on macro stressors and the impacts of the policies on children's physical and mental health. Less attention has been paid to children's and families' responses to those stressors. What is unknown is 1) how families process fear of deportation and uncertainty about the future, 2) what resources, capacities, and strategies they acquire to survive, and 3) how families decide to delegate guardianship of their children to other people.

The need for further studies on coping and resiliency was underscored by a group of researchers whose work focused on undocumented and citizen children with

undocumented parents at a 2016 conference in Austin supported by the National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities (Zayas et al., 2017). The conferees emphasized the importance of research on mixed-status families' ecological sources of strength to inform future practice and also to "shape public opinion away from seeing immigrant children as a societal drain and toward viewing them as a societal resource" (Zayas et al., 2017, p. 420). They specifically mentioned the need for studies that explore "how families communicate and plan for deportation or separation" (p.421). This dissertation addresses this need and explores how undocumented parents prepare themselves and their children for the future, and more specifically, what motivates them to delegate guardianship of their children to other people as a precautionary measure. It also sought to find out how they communicate such decisions with their children.

Research Questions

The main research question that guides the proposed study is: What are the social, psychological, and environmental processes involved in delegating guardianship of US citizen children who are at risk of separation from undocumented parents?

Following are the specific research questions:

Research question 1. What factors or processes contribute to undocumented parents' decisions to delegate guardianship of US citizen children?

Research question 2. What strategies do the parents use to communicate to the children about their own undocumented status?

Research question 3. What strategies do the parents use to communicate to the children their decision to delegate guardianship of them?

Theoretical Frameworks

This study incorporates a theoretical framework that draws upon the pyramid of deportation Burdens (Dreby, 2012) and unstructured decision theory (Mintzberg et al., 1976). Overviews of these two frameworks are provided in relation to their applicability to this research study concerning assigning a guardian in preparation for forced family separation.

Pyramid of Deportation Burdens

The possibility of deportation, or "deportability" as it is referred to in the literature (De Genova, 2002; Enriquez, 2015; Luibheid et al., 2018), of self or a family member, can impact the lives of a greater number of families. Dreby conducted in-depth interviews with 91 parents and 110 children of Mexican descent in New Jersey and Ohio and found that the biggest fear of many families was fear of losing custody of their US citizen children if deported. She also found that although most parents have not been deported, most children expressed fear of parental deportation. This finding has been confirmed by several other studies (Brabeck & Xu, 2010; Gulbas et al., 2016; Yoshikawa, 2011).

Dreby adopts the "injury pyramid" used by public health professionals and presents a "deportation pyramid" to illustrate how parental deportation and the threat of deportation affect families. She reminds that although deportation and detention affect many families, the impact of these actions extends far beyond as millions of people fear it will be occurring to them soon. The pyramid represents different levels of pressure experienced by citizen children, from misunderstandings about immigration, insult, and

stress to inability to live in the country and dissolution of the family (Dreby, 2012). At the bottom of the pyramid lies the burden of suffering from a public misunderstanding about immigration, including micro-aggressions of daily life, insults, biased behavior, and discrimination (See Figure 1). Then on the second level is the constant feeling of insecurity due to fear of apprehension and deportation of a family member. This feeling might happen due to fear of a policy change that can affect their legal status or that of their family members. On the next level are the short-term consequences of deportation, such as changes in their daily routines. The next level represents long-term implications like economic instability resulting from the deportation of a parent. Finally, the top two levels are the most damaging ones when either the children have to leave the US with their deported families or their families are restructured (Dreby, 2012).

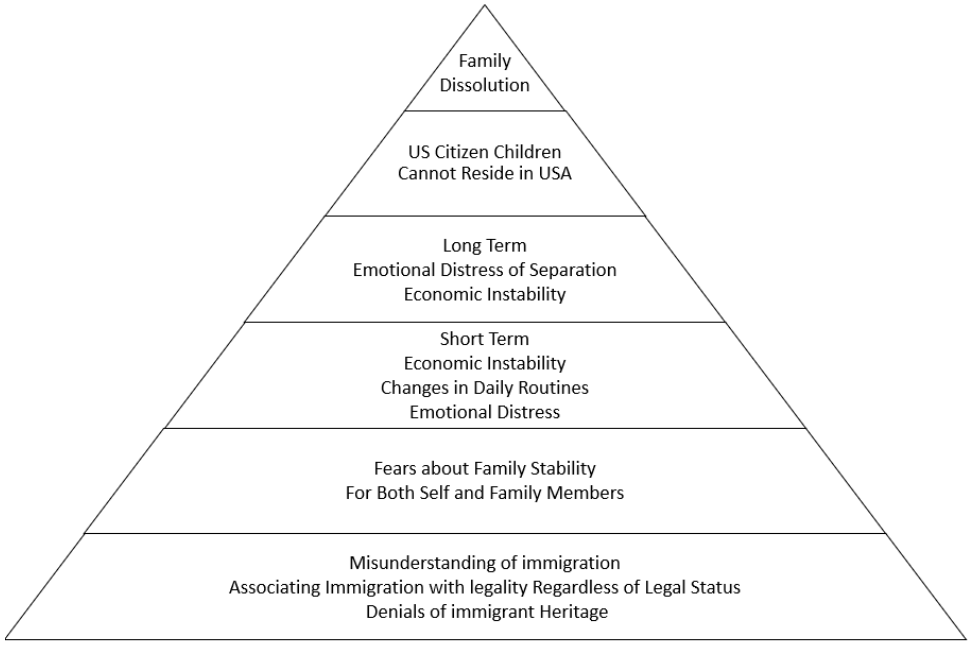

Figure 1: Dreby's Pyramid of Deportation Burdens (Dreby, 2012)

Dreby's pyramid of deportation demonstrates a good picture of how immigration policies affect people at different levels. This model illustrates how the deportation burden goes beyond the people who have experienced the actual removal and that fear of deportation and an anti-immigrant atmosphere affect many people. However, it does not demonstrate how families respond to the policies, what strategies they use to reduce the negative impacts of the immigration policies, how they cope with the current situation, and most importantly, what they do to avoid separation and family dissolution. One of the measures some parents have taken is to find a legal guardian for their children and make arrangements to protect children. This action assures them that they would not lose ties with their children if they get detained or deported. To examine their decision-making process and to understand what factors influence such a decision, I used the unstructured decision model introduced by Mintzberg et al. (1976)

Unstructured decision theory[2]

Most decisions, especially those that are considered important, are not spontaneous, and it takes some time for people or entities to make decisions, which is why many scholars have tried to see them as a process of different stages or phases. Some scholars (Dewey, 1910; Simon, 1960) see this process as sequential, wherein one stage happens after the previous stage is completed. Others, such as Mintzberg et al. (1976), believe that various parts of the decision process can come in different orders, and the decision-maker(s) can go back and forth until they reach a conclusion.

[2] Decision theory is often broken into two parts: normative decision theory is a theory about how decisions should be made, and descriptive theory is a theory about how decisions are actually made. Decision theory scholars have mostly been interested in the normative part. The proposed study aims at understanding how undocumented parents decide to delegate the guardianship of their children to a third party. Therefore, descriptive decision-making is the focus of this study.

In 1910, John Dewey suggested five distinct steps in decision making: (1) felt difficulty; (2) location and definition of the problem; (3) suggestion of possible solution; (4) reasoning and mental elaboration of the suggestions; (5) further observation leading to acceptance or rejection (p. 72). Building on Dewey's thesis, Simon (1960) introduced a trichotomy of intelligence-design-choice as three different phases of decision making. The decision-maker searches the environment at the intelligence stage and collects intelligence and conditions calling for a decision. At the design stage, the decision-maker creates a solution. Possible courses of design are to invent, develop, or analyze. At the last stage, choice, the decision-maker selects a particular design.

For Mintzberg et al. (1976, p. 246), decision entails "a specific commitment to action," and a decision-making process includes "a set of actions and dynamic factors that begins with the identification of a stimulus for action and ends with the specific commitment to action." They specifically talk about "unstructured decisions," which refers to the situations that the decision process has not experienced before and for which there are "no predetermined and explicit set of ordered responses."

In studying decisions, three elements are important to consider: a) the stimuli that evoked the decisions, (b) the solutions, and (c) the process used to arrive at such decisions (Mintzberg et al., 1976). Decisions can be placed on a continuum based on stimuli that evoke them. On one side are "crisis decisions" in response to "intense pressure," and on the other are "purely voluntary decisions." In the center are "problem decisions," which are not entirely voluntary and are evoked by "milder pressures" (p. 251). There are four types of solutions: fully developed solutions at the start of the decision-making process, fully evolved decisions that can be found during the process,

custom-made solutions that are specifically crafted for the decision, and mixed solutions that have elements of both custom made and ready-made decisions (Mintzberg et al., 1976).

Mintzberg et al. (1976) view the decision-making process as three distinct phases related to each other in a circular, not linear, way. The first phase is identification, consisting of two routines: decision recognition, where problems and opportunities are identified, and diagnosis, where existing channels of information are determined to clarify the issue. The next phase is development, which entails defining and clarifying the options, and consists of two routines: the search routine to find solutions that are ready to use; and the design routine, which aims to develop new solutions or modify the existing ones. The last phase is the selection phase, consisting of three routines: the screen routine, which will be used when the previous search phase yields more alternative solutions than can be evaluated. This routine eliminates less desired options. The second routine is the evaluation-choice routine, the actual choice between different alternatives. In the last routine, the decision is finalized and approved (this is more relevant to institutional decision-making). In this view, the decision-maker may cycle within or between phases and even go over one phase more than once. They may even cycle back to the first phase if no solution found is acceptable. Figure 2 shows the relationship between these three phases and their constituent routines.

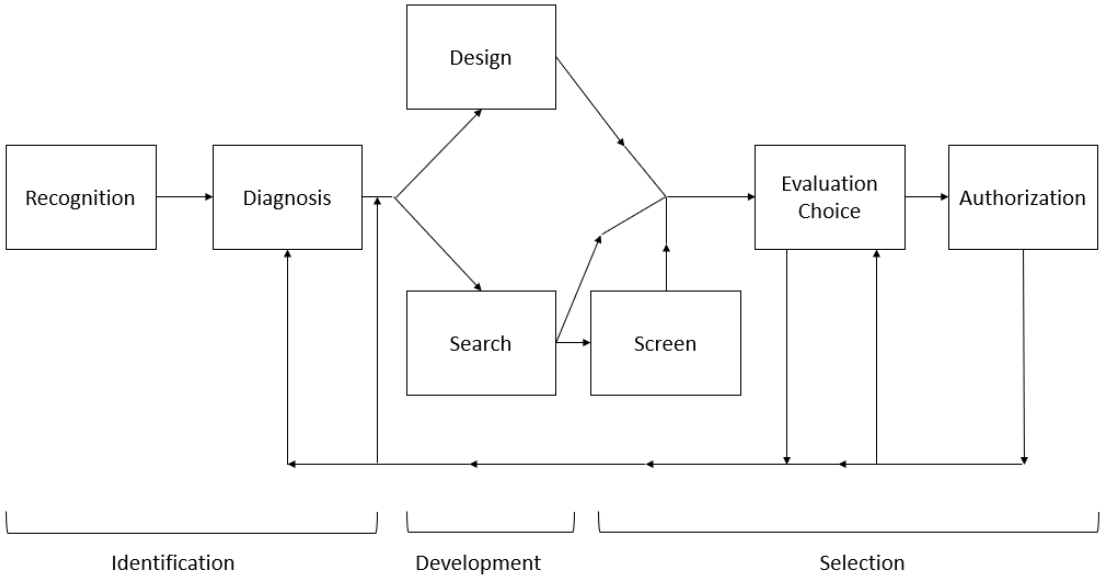

Figure 2: Unstructured decision-making model (Mintzberg et al., 1976)

Unstructured decision theory has been primarily tested in organizational and management literature (Fields, 2001; Lucena & Popadiuk, 2019; Mintzberg et al., 1976; Wilson, 2001). However, an internet-based experiment with individuals showed that individual decision-makers also make diagnoses and evaluate their choices while actively looking for alternatives (Crow, 2006). Individual decision-makers, like institutional ones, seek to reduce the decision into a set of structural routines or familiar sub-decisions which they can solve (Newell & Simon, 1972). In an unstructured decision-making process, an individual must create a solution because one is not available. Mintzberg et al. (1976) categorized this as a "custom-made" decision. In this situation, the individual has little knowledge about various aspects of the decision and its possible consequences. For experienced and familiar situations, decisions are more straightforward.

The decision of undocumented parents to assign a guardian for their children, especially a non-relative one, is an unstructured one because the parents do not know the

consequences of their decisions. While the outcome of the decision-making process is known (i.e., assign a guardian), the consequences are not entirely known.

Conceptual Framework for the Current Study

This study examines the situation wherein undocumented parents have chosen to delegate the guardianship of their children to a third party. Therefore, the outcome of the decision-making process is known. What needs to be discovered is to understand how the parents came to make that particular decision in the context of increased immigration enforcement actions. While the pyramid of deportation provides a guide to understanding the context in which undocumented parents make a decision, the decision theory helps understand the parents' decision-making process and rationality.

These two theoretical frameworks have been used to guide the data collection process. The interview protocol of the proposed study followed the deportation pyramid with broad questions about living undocumented, leading to more specific questions about the families' response to the heightened risk of separation. The decision theory was then used to ask more specific questions on what factors contributed to their decision to delegate their children's guardianship to a third party.

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Impacts of immigration enforcement actions on mixed-status families and US citizen children have been well documented. Guided by Dreby's pyramid of deportation (2012), the literature review covers the impacts of immigration enforcement actions on different levels. It includes the everyday experiences of citizen children and their undocumented parents, access to services, families' economic instability, health and emotional wellbeing of the children, their educational success and development, and involvement of the child welfare system.

Everyday Experiences

The everyday experiences of living with undocumented parents have been addressed in several studies. Dreby (2012) found that fear of parental deportation shapes children's identity, and she found that the biggest fear of many families was fear of losing custody of their US citizen children if deported. Interviewing 8 Latinx adults aged 21 to 38 years, Gonzalez (2018) found that living with the fear of deportation can have long-term impacts, including difficulties forming intimate relationships and the inability to trust people. In interviews with 32 undocumented parents, Enriquez (2015) found that fear of immigration enforcement affected different aspects of the day-to-day life of all members in mixed-status families, including driving, travel, and legal employment. Drawing on the interviews, she discusses how the parents' undocumented status affects each area and how any of these aspects can be stressful for the children.

Zayas and Gulbas (2017) conducted a study of 83 citizen children in late childhood and early adolescence in three groups: a group of children living in Mexico with their deported parents, another group who remained in the US post parental

deportation or detention, and the third group, who lived in the US with their parents. Their analysis showed that children were aware of the privileges that citizenship provided for them and not to their parents, and this created an existential question about who they were and where they belonged for many of them. They also found that the children in all three groups experienced marginalization produced by their parents' undocumented status.

Balderas et al. (2016) went one step further and studied parent-child conversations about undocumented status in two focus groups of 12 Latino/a parents. They found three themes on how parents communicate their undocumented status with their children: (a) children asking questions about legal status, (b) parents teaching children how to respond to discrimination, and (c) parents preparing children to leave the United States. The parents also discussed the emotional difficulties, often distress and frustration, they had experienced once they decided to communicate their legal status with the children. However, some other parents mentioned that they had decided to be silent and not talk about their legal status to protect the children, stating, “let children live their childhood.” Berger Cardoso et al. (2018) also looked at parenting in the context of deportation. They interviewed 70 undocumented parents in Texas who explained that deportation risk had restricted their mobility, negatively affecting their ability to provide care for their children as they desired. For instance, they could not drive their children to school or take them on vacation like other parents. They also mentioned that they had a constant fear of separation and that such fear had changed the family process and shifted roles within the family. These qualitative findings were confirmed and strengthened by a quantitative study by Conway et al. (2020). This study looked at the parent-child relationship in a

sample of 716 Latinx immigrant adolescents. The results show that youths who experienced parental separation were 4.7 times as likely to report poor relationship quality with their mother. Those who experienced separation from their father were 3.4 times as likely to report poor relationship quality with their father.

Access to Services

Fear of identification and deportation can limit the access of US citizen children to services they are legally eligible to use. Families might refrain from applying or extending public service and governmental benefits for their citizen children if they fear that their immigration status might be questioned. A 2004 research study on 2,400 children in low-income households in three cities (Boston, Chicago, and San Antonio) showed that citizen children of immigrants were less likely to receive governmental benefits such as Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), Supplemental Security Income (SSI), and Medicaid than citizen children with US-born parents (Fomby & Cherlin, 2004). Likewise, using Nevada's annual American Community Survey data from 2000 to 2003, Albert (2009) found that citizen children with noncitizen caregivers were more likely to live in poverty than citizen children living with naturalized caregivers. They were less likely to receive TANF cash assistance.

Further, because of their legal status and entitlement to governmental services, citizen children are often overlooked by humanitarian organizations. Most organizations active in immigrant children's issues are focused on refugees and immigrant children. Therefore, in practice, the citizen children do not enjoy the full benefits of being citizens of the US and at the same time they are not a priority for humanitarian organizations. Even if the families manage to get the benefits for their US citizen children, the family

receives a lower total benefit amount because the parents and other undocumented family members are not eligible. Moreover, evidence shows that undocumented families often have difficulties documenting their income, required for applying for most benefits and programs (Speiglman et al., 2013).

US citizen children are eligible and more likely than their undocumented parents and siblings to be insured. However, parental ineligibility and fears of immigration enforcement might hinder US citizen children's access to health insurance coverage. Vargas and Pirog (2016) used a nationally representative sample (n=4898) to test the relationship between risks of deportation (measured as the proportion of deported individuals divided by the number of estimated unauthorized immigrants in a given area) and the probability of Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) benefit use. They found that the risk of deportation is negatively associated with uptake among mixed-status families. In a similar study on the same sample, Vargas (2015) tested the relationship between risks of deportation and Medicaid use among mixed-status families and found that an increase in the risk of deportation is associated with a decrease in Medicaid use. Gelatt (2016) used the first wave of the Los Angeles Family and Neighborhood Survey in 2000–2001 and examined the relationship between parents and children's immigration status, children's health insurance coverage, children's healthcare utilization, and children's health. The findings showed lower Global Health Status (GHS; Fayers et al., 1995) of children with foreign-born parents, especially those in mixed-status or undocumented immigrant families, compared to children with US-born parents (Gelatt, 2016).

Castañeda and Melo (2014) studied mixed-status families' health-seeking behavior in Texas. Interviews with 55 mixed-status families and 43 service providers

found that medications prescribed for a citizen child were frequently used to treat undocumented siblings. They also found that one of the reasons some families avoid registering their citizen children for governmental services such as Medicaid was to avoid damaging future chances for legalization. Koball et al. (2015) also found that US citizen children and their undocumented parents struggled accessing conventional health, mental health, early education, and social services. Instead, their access to health care was often through federally qualified health centers (FQHCs) and other low-cost clinics that serve the uninsured. However, many parents said lacking a driver's license impeded accessing those services.

Economic Hardship

Following the detention or removal of a wage earner, the remaining family members, including citizen children, can face notable short-term and long-term economic disadvantages. A recent study shows that deportation would reduce median household income by 47 percent (Warren & Kerwin, 2017). A 2010 Urban Institute study of 85 families, who experienced deportation between 2006 and 2009, shows that the average family lost 70 percent of its income in the six months following the deportation of a parent, often a male (Chaudry et al., 2010). Another similar study (Koball et al., 2015) found that mothers often struggle to find paid work after deportation or detention of fathers and make up for the lost income, mainly due to lack of prior work experience. The deportation of the wage earner also affects the family's housing abilities. High levels of crowding, moving to smaller and more affordable homes, moving in with families and friends, and relying on shelters after parental deportation have been reported by prior studies (Brabeck & Xu, 2010; Chaudry et al., 2010; Koball et al., 2015). Comparing

deportation data and foreclosure filings, Rugh and Hall (2016, p. 1053) found that deportation and detention of the income-earner lead to a decline in household income and, consequently, eviction or foreclosure among Latinx populations.

Health and Wellbeing

Undocumented status and its perceived risks are stressors that create socioemotional difficulties, including depressive, anxious, or posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms and maybe long-lasting, harming children's identity as US citizens (Dreby, 2012). Zayas (2015) states that the anti-immigrant sentiment profoundly impacts children's psychological wellbeing and that the perpetual worry and fear can cause permanent brain re-structuring. Stress associated with unauthorized status, low wage and poor work conditions, and overcrowded housing can negatively impact parenting practices and family routines which in turn put children at greater risk for emotional and behavioral problems (Landale et al., 2015; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2011; Van Hook et al., 2013). Evidence shows a link between the stresses associated with parents' undocumented status and low-wage work to lower child cognitive development in middle childhood (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2011; Yoshikawa & Kholoptseva, 2013). Landale et al. (2015) investigated the relationship between parental legal status and their children's behavioral functioning in a sample of 2,535 children in California. They found that children of undocumented mothers had significantly higher risks of internalizing and externalizing behavior problems than their counterparts with documented or naturalized citizen mothers. In a study of adjustment and anxiety disorder among children in Oregon (n=8,610), Hainmuller et al. (2017) found that mothers' DACA eligibility significantly reduced children's adjustment and anxiety disorder diagnoses. They also found that

protecting unauthorized immigrants from deportation led to immediate significant improvements in the mental health of their citizen children.

A national study of Section 287(g) of the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act[3] and the Secure Communities Program (SC)[4] found that local engagement with ICE worsened the health and mental health of Latino immigrants (Shu-Huah Wang & Kaushal, 2018). Both programs are among the most typical ways local agencies cooperate with federal immigration authorities. While the Secure Communities program increased mental health distress among Latino immigrants living with noncitizen family members by 2.2 percentage points, Task Force Enforcement under Section 287(g) worsened their mental health distress scores by 15 percent. In addition, jail Enforcement under Section 287(g) increased the proportion of Latino immigrants reporting fair or poor health by one percentage point (Shu-Huah Wang & Kaushal, 2018). These findings show that whether the local authorities decide to cooperate with federal agencies or not and how and to what level they cooperate may impact the health and wellbeing of the immigrant communities.

The compounding effect of actual parental detention and deportation increases the risk of developing a range of disorders, including depression, anxiety, and PTSD in children (Henderson & Baily, 2013; Thompson, 2008). Most empirical studies have reported increased mental health risk and elevated levels of distress among children who

[3] 287(g) permits local and state law enforcement agencies to sign an agreement with the Department of Homeland Security to enforce federal immigration law (Forrester & Nowrasteh, 2018).

[4] Secure Communities allows law enforcement to determine the immigration status of those arrested for non-immigration crimes and prioritize deportation of dangerous criminal aliens (US Immigration and Customs & Enforcement, 2009).

experienced detention or deportation of at least one parent compared to those who have not (Allen et al., 2015; Landale et al., 2015; Rojas-Flores et al., 2017; Zayas et al., 2015). For example, Rojas-Flores et al. (2017) compared 91 US citizen children with detained and deported parents to citizen children whose parents either had a legal document or were undocumented without prior contact with immigration enforcement (aged 9 to 12). They found significantly higher PTSD symptoms, internalizing problems, and overall child functioning in children whose parents had been deported or detained.

In 2010, the Urban Institute conducted a study of children in the aftermath of immigration enforcement actions and found that most children experienced at least four adverse behavioral changes in the six months following a raid or arrest. They cried or were afraid more often; changed their eating or sleeping habits; and/or were more anxious, withdrawn, clingy, angry, or aggressive (Chaudry, 2011). Koball et al. (2015) reported that children with deported parents showed issues such as refusing to eat, having frequent stomachaches or headaches, pulling out their hair, losing interest in daily activities, and more destructive behaviors such as cutting themselves. A study of 48 US citizen children aged 8 to 15 with undocumented parents in Texas found that the psychosocial stressors contributing to depressive symptoms included stressed relationships with parents, the loss of supportive school networks, and experiences of violence (Gulbas et al., 2016). They found that US citizen-children affected by parental deportation reported a greater burden of stressors in their lives.

In the long term, family members of deported people show symptoms of social isolation, depression, and suicidal ideation among remaining parent or caregiver, while children show increased anxiety, depression, and PTSD (Zayas, 2015). A study of 111

Mexican families in Phoenix examined household fear of deportation in relation to salivary proinflammatory cytokines following the passage of an anti-immigrant Senate Bill (SB-1070; Martínez et al., 2018). The results demonstrated that household fear of deportation and family conflict chronic stress strongly related to oral inflammation, even after controlling for adiposity and other chronic stressors.

Growth and Educational Development

Research suggests that a parent's unauthorized status is associated with lower levels of child cognitive development and educational progress (Brabeck et al., 2016; Crosnoe, 2007; Fuller et al., 2009; Ortega et al., 2009; Yoshikawa & Kholoptseva, 2013). Parents' legal vulnerability often leads to poor parental work and conditions, parental psychological distress and is a challenge for parental engagement with a child's school associated with lower academic achievement (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2011). Also, due to fear of deportation, parents might restrict their children's social experiences necessary for their healthy development and growth (Leiner et al., 2017). A longitudinal study in New York City found that the stressors associated with an undocumented status of the parents, including decreased use of out-of-home childcare, predicted children's early development (24 to 36 months; Yoshikawa, 2011). A study of 935 Mexican-origin young adults in California showed that children whose parents have never legalized average about two fewer years of schooling than those with legal or citizen parents (Leach et al., 2011). In a study of 178 low-income Latino children aged 7 to 10, Brabeck et al. (2016) found a significant negative link between parents' legal status and children's academic performance. Interestingly, they found that parental use of social services (e.g., free or subsidized school lunch, Medicaid, and food stamps) positively moderated the

relationship between parents' legal status and children's academic performance. Acting as a protective buffer, social service use lessens the harmful effects of undocumented parental status on the children's academic achievement. Another study of 514 Latino 7th-grade students showed that parent documentation status was significantly associated with students' perceptions of the likelihood of achievement (Shreffler et al., 2018).

Moreover, prior research shows that immigration raids and the arrest of a parent negatively impact children's education (Amuedo-Dorantes & Lopez, 2015; Bellows, 2019; Chaudry et al., 2010). An increase in immigration enforcement raises the likelihood of school absenteeism among students with undocumented parents (Amuedo-Dorantes & Lopez, 2015; Ee & Gándara, 2020; Kirksey et al., 2020). A recent study found that local ICE partnerships reduce the number of Hispanic students by 10% within two years (Dee & Murphy, 2020). Ee and Gándara (2020) surveyed about 750 schools around the country and found that immigrant-origin children academically and psychologically are impacted by the fear and trauma associated with deportation. Bellows (2019) also found that increases in removals were associated with decreases in academic achievement for Hispanic and Black students. Kirksey et al. (2020) argue that students attending school districts in areas with more immigration raids are more likely to be exposed to friends or family members who have been apprehended and thus are more impacted. They found that the number of deportations corresponded with gaps in math achievement and chronic absenteeism in school districts within 25 miles of the deportation sites.

Additionally, many immigrant parents face multiple compounding barriers which negatively impact children's healthy growth and development. Over half of immigrant

parents have limited English proficiency, over one quarter have limited English proficiency and do not have a high school diploma, and 31 percent have limited English proficiency and are low income (Hofstetter & McHugh, 2021). Moreover, immigrant parents have lower digital literacy. There are also disparities in digital access, which impact immigrant parents' ability to help and supervise their children, especially during the COVID-19 crisis and remote learning (Hofstetter & McHugh, 2021).

Child Welfare

One of the most extreme consequences of immigration enforcement actions is that many children end up in foster care for long periods and are sometimes permanently separated from their parents. One common ground based on which parental rights can be permanently terminated is the parent's "failure to support or maintain contact with the child" (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016). According to the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA), State child welfare agencies require to file a petition to terminate parental rights when a child has been in foster care for 15 of the most recent 22 months (Xu, 2005). In detention, lines of communication between parents and their children are often severed. There is no requirement that individuals in immigration detention be held close to where they lived, which can negatively impact their participation in child welfare proceedings (Butera & Cervantes, 2013).

Moreover, detainees can be transferred from one facility to another without prior notice to the child welfare system, making it difficult for the family courts and child welfare to locate and communicate with the parent (Butera & Cervantes, 2013). Besides, it is almost impossible for the detained parents to comply with their child welfare reunification plans (Prandini et al., 2019). This might happen because of a lack of

adequate policies or procedures (Wessler, 2011) or a lack of understanding regarding immigration policies and the barriers faced by immigrants among child welfare staff and attorneys (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2015). More specifically, child welfare professionals' misperception about reasons for parental detention (e.g., criminal activity vs. immigration issues) can affect the way their case is treated. As such, cases of children of undocumented immigrants may experience difficulties, including extended periods in the child welfare system (Wessler, 2011). Moreover, even if parents are eventually released from immigration detention, they will not immediately reunify with their children who are in the custody of the child welfare system due to bureaucratic procedures. It is even more complicated for deported parents as few child welfare departments systematically contact foreign consulates (Wessler, 2013).

The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (PL 110-351) requires child welfare authorities "to identify and notify all adult relatives of a child, within 30 days of the child's removal, of the relatives' options to become a placement resource for the child" (Park, 2014). According to Wessler (2011), child welfare agencies are sometimes reluctant to consider placing a child in the care of undocumented relatives. A 2018 study of 14 states and six counties found that child welfare agencies take different practices in different jurisdictions concerning children of immigrants (Greenberg et al., 2019). In some states, even if the undocumented kin are potentially eligible to qualify for placement, they still need to meet other requirements for placement. Those requirements include background checks, state residency requirements, and proof of educational attainment, particularly if they want to get licensed to receive financial assistance (Greenberg et al., 2019). In addition, the definition of kinship varies

in different states and, if it is overly narrow, can potentially limit the options undocumented immigrants have (Greenberg et al., 2019).

Guardianship

Undocumented parents fearing future separation may be worried about who will care for their children if they get arrested, detained, or deported. Some might make verbal arrangements with somebody they trust and know, some might make written arrangements, and some might make notarized arrangements. Unfortunately, the literature has not yet discussed these options. There are different types of child custody options that the immigrant families might pick, probably depending on their socio-economic status, having a relative with legal status, their knowledge of the available options, age of children, and the probability of future separation. Despite the media's and immigrant rights advocates' concerns, none of these issues have been received the attention they deserve from academia.

A study of relations of immigration enforcement impacts on living arrangements of a nationally representative sample of US citizens found that increased immigration enforcement actions increase the probability that the children will be left behind in the care of relatives or friends who are not at risk of deportation by 18% (Amuedo-Dorantes & Arenas-Arroyo, 2019). Also, they found that the deportation of fathers makes it more likely that the households get split, and the children stay in the care of their mothers in the US (Amuedo-Dorantes & Arenas-Arroyo, 2019). Another study on 70 undocumented parents with dependent children investigated child custody plans in case of deportation or detention (Berger Cardoso et al., 2020). Of the 70 participants, only 7.1% reported having a notarized plan, while 55.7% reported no plan, and 37.1% reported a verbal plan with a

spouse or family member. All those who reported a notarized plan (n=5) had US citizen children. Besides, those individuals who had experienced prior separation from their children more often had a custody plan (notarized or verbal) than those who had not (Berger Cardoso et al., 2020).

There are several studies on guardianship planning among HIV-infected parents (Cook et al., 2004; Cowgill et al., 2007; Rotheram-Borus et al., 2004). In those cases, guardianship planning mainly included having a legal will and/or a standby guardianship agreement in place. Child guardianship planning among undocumented immigrants might substantially differ from those living with HIV. While such an arrangement is temporary for immigrant parents, it is permanent for most people living with HIV. Despite this significant difference, some of the findings of studies with this population might apply to immigrant families' situations. A longitudinal study of 296 parents living with HIV for 708 children over five years (Rotheram-Borus et al., 2004) found that parents were increasingly more likely to make custody plans over time. Changes in custody plans were common (54.1%), but only 14.5% of children had a plan in place over the entire 5-year period. Custody plans were positively related to being a female parent, positive-action parental coping, and younger child age. Other studies show that children cope better when parents make child custody arrangements prior to their death (Dane & Levine, 1994; Gardner & Preator, 1996). One study found that guardianship planning decreases the likelihood of children being shuffled from one home to another, spending prolonged periods in foster care, or being separated from siblings (Gardner & Preator, 1996).

According to the Cambridge dictionary (n.d.), a guardian is “a person who has the legal right and responsibility of taking care of someone who cannot take care of himself

or herself, such as a child whose parents have died." Thus, a guardian has the authority to make the same routine decisions about a child that a parent would, which include education, medical care, and living arrangements, among others. Traditionally, a guardian would take over when the parent(s) could no longer care for their children and were somehow permanent. However, in immigration settings, parents do not need a permanent guardian for their children. Mostly, they need a temporary arrangement with someone they can trust to give the guardianship of their children for some time. Apart from court-appointed guardianship, there are other options for parents to assign a guardian for their children. For example, standby guardianship allows parents to legally transfer custody of their children to another person while retaining their parental rights (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2018). Standby guardianship laws were developed to address the needs of parents with critical health conditions. The parent can determine the conditions under which the guardianship commences. During the parents' presence, the guardian is expected to be on standby and sometimes embrace some responsibilities only when needed and then step back again when their services are not needed (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2018). Even though these laws might differ state by state, there is a need for court approval. Another example that does not need court presence and can be done by an attorney is a power of attorney (Gomez, 2019). Personal communication (June 2021) with North Suburban Legal Aid Clinic in Chicago, specializing in providing pro bono services to undocumented immigrants, revealed that child guardianship plans were primarily short-term guardianship (one year) without judge approval requirements.

Discussion about Literature

The literature has covered the negative impacts of immigration enforcement policies and practices on mixed-status families, particularly US citizen children's health and wellbeing, yet a dearth of literature exists. There are very few studies investigating mixed-status families' coping strategies and resiliency. A doctoral dissertation focused on examining coping methods of Latino youth following parental deportation (Hermann, 2017). In-depth interviews with 8 Latino adolescents and their mothers who had recently experienced the deportation of a family member revealed that following the deportation of a parent, the family had relied heavily on informal support networks and faith-based organizations. While mothers generally saw faith as a coping tool and used their social networks, mainly extended family, the children used school-based aid and peer support. A similar study (Philbin & Ayón, 2016) of 54 Latino immigrant parents examined their strategies to protect children from the harm of anti-immigrant policies. The common strategies included promoting the safety and wellbeing of children by postponing the discussion about legal status, letting the children live their childhood, and sheltering them from immigration policies. Another theme discussed by the parents was enhancing their own capacity by pursuing education and obtaining legal documentation.

Interestingly, engaging in change efforts within their community, primarily through participation in marches for immigrant rights, was another strategy mentioned by the respondents as parents believed these efforts could alleviate the harmful effects of the policies (Philbin & Ayón, 2016). Xu and Brabeck (2012) also briefly mention mixed-status families' resiliency when their children's access to governmental services is affected by deportation or detention of a family member. Their findings indicated a

similar level of service utilization among citizen children of undocumented Latino immigrants compared to their documented peers. In addition, they found that the families very often use their social support networks to navigate the system, overcome their fears, and increase their efficacy by mobilizing the available resources. They also found that schools were an entry point for many of them to seek services for their citizen children.

While the literature has primarily focused on how the children and their families live with and experience undocumented status, few studies address how the families process and understand the legal status. Additionally, hardly any study has examined how undocumented immigrants prepare themselves and their citizen children for the possibility of deportation and leaving their children behind.

CHAPTER III: METHODS

This chapter discusses the study design, the study setting and sampling procedures, entry to the field, researcher's role, data collection methods, analytic approach, and ethical considerations.

Study Design

This study uses a qualitative, grounded theory design. Such designs are widely used in exploratory areas and where there is little guiding theory available in the literature (Martin et al., 2018). According to Flick (2018), grounded theory has four features: minimal preconception about the topic, synchronous data collection and analysis, use of different interpretations for data analysis, and the objective of constructing middle-range theories. As previously mentioned, there is a dearth of knowledge on how mixed-status families prepare for possible separation and what factors contribute to their decision-making regarding assigning a prospective guardian for their children. This dissertation is an exploratory study seeking to find those factors and develop a hypothetical relational path model that can be further explored and tested in subsequent research studies. This study develops a grounded theory based on data collected from undocumented parents who have chosen to assign a non-relative third party as the guardian of their children. In this study, data was primarily collected through semi-structured, face-to-face, or skype interviews with open-ended questions followed by a short survey for collecting demographic information.

Setting

Data were collected virtually, facilitated by the Nora Sandigo Children Foundation (NSCF) in Homestead, Florida, located 35 miles southwest of Miami in

Florida. Homestead is the largest town in the agricultural part of Miami Dade County and is well known for its large population of immigrant farmworkers, many of whom are undocumented. The area is a target for immigration enforcement raids and has been the site of many protests by immigrant rights activists. Homestead also hosts one of the largest detention centers in Florida. The population is aware of immigration enforcement actions. Fear of apprehension by authorities has made access to undocumented people challenging and is the reason for partnering with a trusted entity like NSCF.

NSCF, previously known as American Fraternity and Nicaraguan Fraternity, is a grassroots community organization in Miami established in 1989. It was first founded to address issues that the Nicaraguan immigrant community was dealing with during the Nicaraguan revolution. Nora Sandigo, the founder of the organization, was herself a refugee from Nicaragua. In the 1980s, she moved to Venezuela, France, and then to Miami. The organization mainly was helping Nicaraguan refugees who were demobilized from the Contras and recently arrived in the US. The services primarily included supporting the new arrivals with immigration paperwork, facilitating access to housing and other resources available to refugees, and helping with finding employment. The organization started to partner with other community organizations, churches, and public schools to respond to the growing needs of immigrant communities. After receiving financial support from the Miami County Department of Development, it expanded its target population and started serving immigrants and refugees from other countries of origin. Their offered programs also grew to provide other services, including free English classes. However, their main focus remained connecting community members to legal experts on immigration issues. The organization collaborated with immigration attorneys

in a couple of cases. As a result of such cooperation, the organization became a pioneer in advocating for immigration reform. Ms. Sandigo was the main plaintiff in a class-action lawsuit against the federal government for the deportation of many immigrants, including Nicaraguans. The organization was also at the heart of a social movement (Rodríguez, 2016) that led to the Nicaraguan Adjustment and Central American Relief Act of 1997 (NACARA; 111 Stat. 2160) that provided relief from removal for many Nicaraguans, Cubans, Salvadorans, and Guatemalans. Having been at the forefront of the successful social movement, Ms. Sandigo earned national fame. Immigrant families from all over the country would contact her for assistance.

In 1997, a Peruvian mother called Ms. Sandigo from a detention center in Texas, asking her to take custody of her two children, one of them a US citizen. Ms. Sandigo had never known this person before, but when she was told about the situation of the mother and her two children, she decided to help them. Although she never took care of the children as the mother decided to take her children back to Peru with her at the time of deportation, accepting this responsibility changed the course of Ms. Sandigo's life and the organization's direction. Later, in 2009, two children showed up at Ms. Sandigo's doorstep, asking her to take care of them as their mother had been arrested and their father had escaped the ICE raids. They were her neighbor's children; their mother had told them to go to Ms. Sandigo and ask for help. Later that day, the mother signed the paperwork from detention and officially assigned Ms. Sandigo as the legal guardian. Those two children lived under Ms. Sandigo's care for about ten years. As immigration enforcement intensified, more families reached out to Ms. Sandigo. Between 2009 to November 2016, she took custody of about 900 children. Since the presidential election

in 2016, this number grew to nearly 1500. While most children are from South Florida, there are several from other states all over the country. In a personal communication (June 5, 2020), Ms. Sandigo emphasized that she had never planned to be the caretaker of so many children and just responded to the community's needs and “Jesus’s call.”

With so many families approaching Ms. Sandigo to be the guardian of their children, the organization’s focus shifted to children separated or at risk of being separated from their parents. Consequently, the organization changed its name from “American Fraternity” to “Nora Sandigo Children Foundation." She was featured in several English and Spanish local, national, and international news outlets, including The Washington Post, Daily Mail, CNN, New York Times, Guardian, Miami Herald, and NPR. Her story was also profiled in a documentary dubbed "The Great Mother," screened in several national and international film festivals (LaMattina & Walker, 2018). NSCF was very active in advocating the rights of children of undocumented immigrants. It was at the heart of several campaigns in Tallahassee and Washington, DC, showing support for the passage of the Dream Act, DACA, and especially DAPA.

The NSCF team consists of Nora Sandigo, the founder, and executive director, an accountant, a public relations director, a facility director who manages the volunteers, and 41 active volunteers. While the volunteers primarily help with organizing the events, preparing food and goody packages, NSCF staff are the ones involved with the families regarding issues related to guardianship.

Families’ profiles

According to Ms. Sandigo, out of 1500 cases of guardianship over the years since 2009, 58% are female, and 42% are male. 28% were aged 0 to 4 years, 38% were in the 5

to 12 age range, and 34% were between 13 and 18 when Ms. Sandigo assumed guardianship. Several have reached 18 under her custody, including five who stayed at Ms. Sandigo's house for more than five years. However, she mentioned that most children who had stayed with her family at some point stayed only for a brief period. For instance, they stayed with her while their parents were in detention, and many were reunited with at least one parent afterward. In June 2020, four children were under her care. She mentioned that the number of children living with her usually depended on the intensity of immigration enforcement and ICE raids in the community (Nora Sandigo, personal communication, June 5, 2020). However, most children live at least with one of their parents (primarily mothers), and Ms. Sandigo only acts as the legal guardian where the mother cannot or does not feel safe to be present. For instance, when the father is detained and children are needed in the court, she would accompany them because the mother might not feel safe going. Another example is taking the children to or picking them up from the airport (Nora Sandigo, personal communication, June 5, 2020).

There are also several cases where both parents are present and are not actively dealing with immigration enforcement but have decided to have a notarized arrangement with Ms. Sandigo as a precautionary measure for the future. Most cases are from North and Central America, with Guatemala (45%) and Mexico (33%), followed by El Salvador (7%), Honduras (7%), and Nicaragua (5%). However, there are few cases from other nationalities, such as Chinese, Indian, and African (Nora Sandigo, personal communication, August 15, 2021).

NSCF offers a variety of services to children and their families. The main areas of activities include humanitarian services, legal services, advocacy, and skill development

(NSCF Program Policy, 2019): Humanitarian services aim to provide immediate relief for food, basic needs, school supplies, transportation, and housing when needed. Legal services aim to prevent the breakdown of family ties for immigration reasons and help the families navigate the immigration system. NCSF advocacy — through specific legal actions — for the right of immigrant children and those born in the United States with immigrant parents to live with their families and raise awareness of the community and key political actors about the importance of maintaining family ties. Finally, the development of skills aims to help families integrate and adapt to the society, culture, and processes of the United States.

However, the organization's role for most families goes beyond what is written on paper. It is a go-to place for every issue, from seeking advice on children's matters to delegating their children's guardianship and from seeking advice on immigration issues to seeking a temporary shelter. As such, most of what the organization does are actions taken in reaction to the needs of the families. Like many other grassroots organizations, NSCF heavily relies on its founder and executive director. Ms. Sandigo is the face of the organization, has deep knowledge of the community's needs, is well trusted by the people, and has a tremendous informal network of community leaders, other non-profit organizations, and the diaspora. Most of the activities also are being implemented solely by her, including connecting families to pro bono lawyers, accompanying children to courts and other places, liaising with other non-profit and faith-based organizations about the needs of families, raising funds, and advocating. Apart from Ms. Sandigo, three people are as well-trusted by the community as Ms. Sandigo. One is responsible for organizing in-kind donations and managing volunteers. One is responsible for family

registration for the events and when donations are being distributed, and another is responsible for social media and website management. All three are long-time volunteers and do not get paid by the organization. NSCF also has a roster of 41 active volunteers ready to assist the organization when they are called upon. These people mainly participate in NSCF Sunday lunch events that are organized every two weeks. They help organize, package and distribute food and hygiene boxes. They prepare and serve warm food, and for special occasions, they entertain children and their families. Apart from this group of volunteers, NSCF has a roster of attorneys that can be reached out to for pro bono legal services.

Financial resources

The organization first started relying on donations from the Catholic church and people who had heard about NSCF (then American Fraternity) locally. Later, during the 1990s, they received $100,000 government funding from the Department of Public Housing and Community Development Miami-Dade County and expanded operations to hold civic engagement activities and educational training for newly arrived asylum seekers. This funding was renewed for another period, but as the NACARA Act (1977) was passed and the organization accomplished one of its most significant objectives, NSCF did not manage to secure the funding for another period. Until 2021, NSCF had not made any systematic effort to seek funding but had merely relied on in-kind and in-cash donations from private organizations, people, faith-based organizations, and volunteers. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the organization secured funding from governmental sources and private foundations to respond to the increased needs of families and children (Nora Sandigo, personal communication, August 15, 2021).

Guardianship

Guardianship is at the heart of NSCF's services and is actually what makes this organization so unique. "I am doing this not because I see myself capable of providing care for hundreds of children but simply because no one else does it…these families came to me, and [I] do not see in myself the ability to say no because I think this is what Jesus wants me to do," Ms. Sandigo clarified (personal communication, June 5, 2020). As such, most of the activities she does as the children's legal guardian are spontaneous and respond to requests. As a result, her involvement in children's lives varies; while she is closely engaged in decision-making and providing care for some children, she is just the legal guardian on paper for some others. She explains that some families can provide care for their children, and they have only reached out to her to make sure that if they ever faced an issue with immigration authorities, they can rely on someone. Thus, her work practically starts when the family faces a problem they cannot solve and need her assistance. According to her, this happens especially the family need to deal with federal authorities or courts. In a personal communication (June 5, 2020), she said: "I am not involved unless I am asked to get involved…when I take charge, I ensure that children are safe and their needs, like any needs such as schooling, housing, health care, food, are met".

However, her services are not limited to providing care for the children but may include other types of assistance to the families. According to Ms. Sandigo, if the parent(s) are detained solely for immigration issues and not detained for engaging in criminal activities, she uses her list of pro bono attorneys through the Catholic church to help the families with their case. She sees these services as a part of a care package to

reunite the children with their families. She said that she had helped reunification of many families. One of the cases she is particularly proud of is a Guatemalan father who had been deported. With Ms. Sandigo's sponsorship and the help of pro bono lawyers, she returned and reunified with his children. Other examples are reunifying the children who passed the border unaccompanied to join their families in the US and were placed in a temporary shelter. Again, Ms. Sandigo facilitated the reunification process (personal communication, June 5, 2020).

On the paperwork procedure, Ms. Sandigo explained that many families, especially those already in detention, use the available resources and only send her the paperwork. However, many who approach her also ask for help with the paperwork, and NSCF employs a ready-to-use "power of attorney" template and notarizes it using their resources. She highlighted that neither she nor the staff encourages families to assign her as the guardian. She iterated that "We never ask children or their families to choose me as the legal guardian. It should come from them and be organic from their hearts. If they ask me, I'll be honored to receive their children, and I will do whatever possible to help them and their families" (personal communication, June 5, 2020).

Researcher

The researcher is a doctoral candidate in social welfare, and she has experience in working with immigrants and refugees through extensive work with international humanitarian organizations. She has knowledge of the setting by virtue of working as a volunteer with NSCF, where she interacts with the population from which the sample for the study was drawn. Through her involvement, she has had the chance to get to know

staff, volunteers, and clients and this offers her ample opportunity to interact with the population under study.

Sampling and Recruitment

To address the study's research questions, the researcher employed maximum variation (Patton, 1987) and purposive sampling, which is most appropriate in grounded theory methodology (Palinkas et al., 2015). The research participants included immigrant parents, primarily undocumented, who had at least one US citizen child under the age of 18 and who made arrangements for delegating guardianship of the children to a third party. To find patterns that cut across divergent participants (Patton, 1987), the researcher planned to select participants who varied in sex, age, nationality of origin, and deportation/detention experience (whether they have dealt with immigration enforcement authorities or not). However, in practice, she was not able to recruit any male participant for two reasons: 1) many families who delegated the guardianship of their children to Nora Sandigo were female-headed, and men were either deported, detained, or not living with the families, and 2) those who were reached declined an interview.

In grounded theory studies, the sample size is determined by theoretical saturation, which means the researcher needs to continue recruiting until a few new codes are generated (Miles et al., 2014). As recommended by the literature (Creswell, 2007, p. 67), it was aimed to recruit at least 20 parents who decided to delegate the legal guardianship of their US citizen children to Nora Sandigo. However, it was decided to recruit more participants for two reasons: 1) some of the interviews were shorter than expected, and this was especially out of the researcher's control because she was not the one who conducted the interviews, and 2) since February 2021, when many

unaccompanied children crossed the border to enter the US, the agency received more requests for guardianship. These requests were either from parents in their countries seeking guardianship for their children or parents in the US who could not locate their children in the system. Overall, 27 participants were recruited for 26 interviews.

Securing the Sample

NSCF facilitated the identification and recruitment of the participants. The NSCF director informed those who met the study's selection criteria through regular contact with the families. If parents indicated an interest in participating, she arranged the interview date and time. To protect the identity and contact information of the participants, the researcher was not a part of the recruitment process. The NSCF director asked all participants to choose pseudonyms before encountering the research team to ensure their identities were protected. However, when the interviewee mentioned a name, the name was redacted from the interview transcript. The NSCF director was trained to introduce the study and keep track of the people she told about the study and the number of people who declined to participate. This record allowed the researcher to track how many people were reached out to and what percentage agreed to participate. Those who completed an interview received $20 for their time. Overall, 35 eligible individuals were told about the study, and 9 (primarily men) rejected to participate (25%).

Data Collection

Interview was the primary method of data collection. A semi-structured interview protocol was used to guide the interviews and included questions and prompts asked during the interview (see Appendix 1). The interview protocol was first drafted by the researcher and finalized after consultation with the dissertation committee members and

the staff of NSCF. The interviews took place between October 2020 to September 2021. All interviews with the parents were conducted in Spanish by a bilingual student who was trained in qualitative interviewing and was fluent in spoken and written Spanish. At the beginning of the session, a consent statement was read to the participants, and verbal consent was obtained. Research participants were reminded that they might withdraw from the study at any time without any fear of retaliation on the researcher's part. They were also assured that the researcher and the interviewer did not know their real names and that they would be known only by pseudonyms to guarantee their anonymity and privacy (Creswell, 2013). They were given the researcher's full name and contact information, that of her dissertation chair, and the contact information of the FIU Office of Research Integrity so that they could have the opportunity to report any concerns.

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim in the original language (Spanish). The transcriptions were done by a Spanish-speaking volunteer who was not involved in the interview process. Then, a Spanish to English translator was hired to translate the transcriptions into English. To ensure the quality of translation, the English translation was checked by another bilingual person who was not involved in the transcription or translation. This process was done to ensure that the Spanish transcriptions had been accurately translated into English.

Data Analysis

The analysis started by reading the translated interviews. Each text was read twice before coding began. Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (ATLAS.ti, version 9.0) was then used to organize and assist in analyzing translated texts. Coding started as soon as translated text became available and was entered into ATLAS.ti.

Open coding

The researcher first generated a list of a priori codes based on the literature and relevant to the research questions. These codes were considered provisional until they were “grounded” by being attached to relevant quotations in transcripts (Strauss, 1987). Those a priori codes which could not be linked to actual quotations were dropped from the analysis. However, as expected, most codes were generated through open coding. Open coding starts by "scrutinizing" the transcript "closely: line by line, even word by word…to produce concepts that seem to fit the data" (Strauss, 1987). The codes were attached to text quotations relating to the concepts (codes) and themes they represented (Strauss, 1987). At this stage, the researcher coded “liberally" to include as many different categories of response as possible (Ford et al., 2000).

The first level coding was as detailed as possible and continued until code saturation. For codes that seemed to be related together and belonged to a similar higher level category, the researcher changed the code label using category name, “colon,” and the code name. For example, “reason for migration: violence” denotes that the first level code of “violence” could be categorized under “reason for migration.” This helped better structure hierarchical coding. During the coding of each interview, the researcher regularly went back and forth to previous transcripts to make changes in the codes, rename some of the codes, or create new ones. This was also done to ensure codes were used uniformly throughout different transcripts. Code names were mainly based on the interviewees' words, so the code was renamed when a new word emerged that better described the concept. If needed, the researcher used the "comment" option to describe

what a code entailed. This was done so that the researcher could later remember the reasoning and logic for choosing a particular name to describe a code and leave an "audit trail" of her decisions in the research (O'Brien et al., 2014; Padgett, 1998). During first-level coding, 185 codes were generated attached to 815 quotations.

Theoretical coding

The next step was to refine the categories resulting from the open coding stage and elaborate on the emerging relationship among those categorifies (Flick, 2018). Once all transcripts had been coded to the point of theoretical saturation, the researcher began to cluster initial codes together to create more abstract codes. The researcher used “code group” and “smart code” options in Atlas.ti to better organize the second-level codes. After no new categories could be generated from the open codes, conceptual saturation was reached. Some codes were related to more than one category, representing different concepts. At this level, 30 code groups, or categories, were generated. Like the previous stage, the researcher used the constant comparison method to ensure the emergent categories correctly capture the similarities and differences in the lower-level codes. Negative case analysis was also used to verify key findings (Padgett, 1998). This mainly included searching for data elements that did not support or contradicted patterns emerging from the analysis.

Theoretical memos

The researcher kept comments of theoretical importance throughout the analysis (Strauss, 1987), using the “memo” option in Atlas.ti. Such memos were linked to codes and quotations. In addition, the researcher kept a different file noting her interpretation of

the data to guide subsequent analyses of the data. In addition to theoretical memo taking, the researcher used the transcripts' comment section to store notes relevant to each interview.

Themes

At this stage, the researcher began examining the categories to explore their hypothetical relationship to each other and identify the themes (Tie et al., 2019). The "Network" option in Atlas.ti, which is best to visually follow the linkage between initial and higher-level codes, was employed to map the relations between categories within a theme. This happened by comparing different interviews, searching for examples and evidence relevant to categories (Flick, 2018). As initial codes were already linked to quotations from the transcripts, the abstract concepts can be traced to the respondents' words. After creating each theme, the researcher reexamined the lower level codes and quotations to make sure that the emergent theme accurately summarized the shared concept. The researcher tried to find logical relations that kept the themes relevant to the main research questions.

Developing theory

Finally, the researcher explored the relations in and between the themes to determine to what extent the data provided theory that could shed light on each research question. The themes were used to describe the respondents' viewpoints about the research questions (Flick, 2018). At this stage, the "group network" option in Atlas.ti used to group the themes related to each research question. The researcher used Microsoft Word diagrams to draw the relations between the themes. These diagrams provided hypothetical explanations (theories) grounded in the respondents' words.

Quality Control

Data collection was conducted over a period of a few months, allowing the interviews to be transcribed, translated, and coded individually and gradually. Therefore, data collected in the earlier interviews were checked and verified in later ones. To enhance the validity of the interpretations of the data, the researcher conducted a key informant session with staff and volunteers of NSCF. This session also served as a debriefing session for the organization. During this session, the researcher shared the study's preliminary findings and sought their feedback. The selection criteria for choosing staff and volunteers for the key informant session included having more than six months of experience working with the population. Unfortunately, three key volunteers could not participate in the group sessions. Therefore, two separate individual interviews were conducted to record their views about the findings. Although the interviews and the debriefing session were unstructured, they all started by presenting the preliminary findings from the parents' interviews and then seeking staff and volunteers' insights and feedback. The participants were also asked about their work experience with the families, perspectives about guardianship decisions, and observations. All interviews were conducted virtually between September and November 2021 and were audio-recorded.

As previously indicated, the researcher used the comment and memo options in Atlas.ti to document analytical and reflective notes about decisions made throughout the data collection and analysis processes as an audit trail. Also, constant comparison and negative case methods were used throughout, particularly during the within-interview and across-interviews comparison analysis, to look for similarities and examine outliers for

any significance. These various techniques contributed to a rigorous process of data collection and analysis.

Mentor and Peer Debriefing

The researcher discussed my analytical processes with her mentors, peers, and colleagues (Krefting, 1991). Debriefing enabled the researcher to assess the data and the model deeper, and this was extremely helpful in ensuring that the models drawn from data made logical sense.

Ethical Consideration and Data Management

Risk to the participants

There were several potential risks to the participants associated with this study. The principal risk would be potential harm resulting from a breach of confidentiality because of the undocumented status of the participants. To minimize that risk, the researcher did not collect any sensitive or identifiable information. In addition, with IRB approval, participants were asked to give verbal consent to participate in the study. To guarantee their anonymity and privacy, participants were asked by the community organization to choose a pseudonym before encountering the research team and starting the interview (Creswell, 2013).

The discussion of immigration status might cause psychological discomfort for the parents and the children. Moreover, speaking about the decision to transfer children's custody to a third person and talking about personal family dynamics might distress the participants. To minimize potential harm and address participants' concerns about confidentiality, the interviewer honestly communicated the information to the participants

at the beginning of the study. The participants were reminded that they might withdraw from the study at any time without any fear of retaliation on the researcher's part. The participants were reminded that the proposed research would offer them an opportunity to tell their stories, and the potential reader would hopefully gain an understanding of the profound impacts of living under constant fear of deportation. No participants demonstrated doubt before the interview or significant distress during the interview. On the contrary, many expressed that it felt good to share their life stories and that somebody was interested to hear that.

Data management

All interviews were audio-recorded with a professional voice recording device. All data, including interview recordings and transcripts, and memos, were kept on a password-protected laptop to prevent unauthorized access. After finalizing the study, all voice recordings will be destroyed to prevent them from being misused by unauthorized people.

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

Overview

This chapter describes the findings of this dissertation study. First, it describes the demographic characteristics of the study sample. Participant characteristics can be found in Table 1. Then the results will be presented according to the research question they address. In the process of data analysis and theory creation, two visual models were developed to explain and display the findings. The first model, which can be found in Figure 3, includes the results from the first research question. The second model, which can be found in Figure 4, includes the findings from the second and third research questions.

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Twenty-seven participants were recruited between October 2020 and September 2021. The participants varied in their countries of origin and experiences with immigration enforcement authorities. Except for one man who participated in the interview with his wife, all other participants were women. The mean age was 37.9 (SD = 9.1), with the youngest being 25 and the oldest being 64 years old. The majority of participants were from Guatemala (44%), followed by Mexico (37%), El Salvador (11%), Nicaragua, and Honduras (each 4%). 63% of the participants had no education or primary education, 15% had middle school education, and 22 had high school education. Those who worked had all low-paid, difficult jobs such as working on farm fields (44%), construction (7%), housekeeping/ nanny (7%), house and office cleaning (4%), and restaurant (1%). Most participants (62%) experienced immigration enforcement, while 38 % had no experience with immigration enforcement authorities. Seven (27%) participants

experienced deportation of a family member (mostly husband), five (19%) experienced separations from their children, and four (15%) were either previously deported and came back or had an active case in an immigration court.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristic of Participants

Demographic Characteristic	M(SD)	n (%)
Age	37.1 (9.1)	
Gender (F)		26 (96)
Country of Origin		
Guatemala		12 (44)
Mexico		10 (37)
El Salvador		3 (11)
Honduras		1 (4)
Nicaragua		1 (4)
# of Children	3.2 (1.4)	
Education		
No education		5 (19)
Primary education		12 (44)
Middle school education		4 (15)
High school		6 (22)
Occupation		
Agriculture		11 (41)
None		8 (30)
Housekeeping/nanny		2 (7)
Construction		2 (7)
Not recorded		2 (7)
House cleaning		1 (4)
Restaurant		1 (4)
Immigration/ICE involvement		
No		10 (37)
Yes- Deported husband/family member		7 (26)
Yes- Separated child		6 (23)
Yes- Previously deported/ actively dealing with the court		4 (15)

Decision to Assign a Guardian

The first research question is, "what factors or processes contribute to undocumented parents' decisions to delegate guardianship of US citizen children?" The

primary objective of this question was to explore the environmental, social, and psychological factors underlying the parents' decision to choose a guardian for their children. However, this question led the researcher to ask why the parents all chose the same person, the NSCF founder, as the guardian. Figure 3 shows the model that explains the rationale behind parents' decisions.

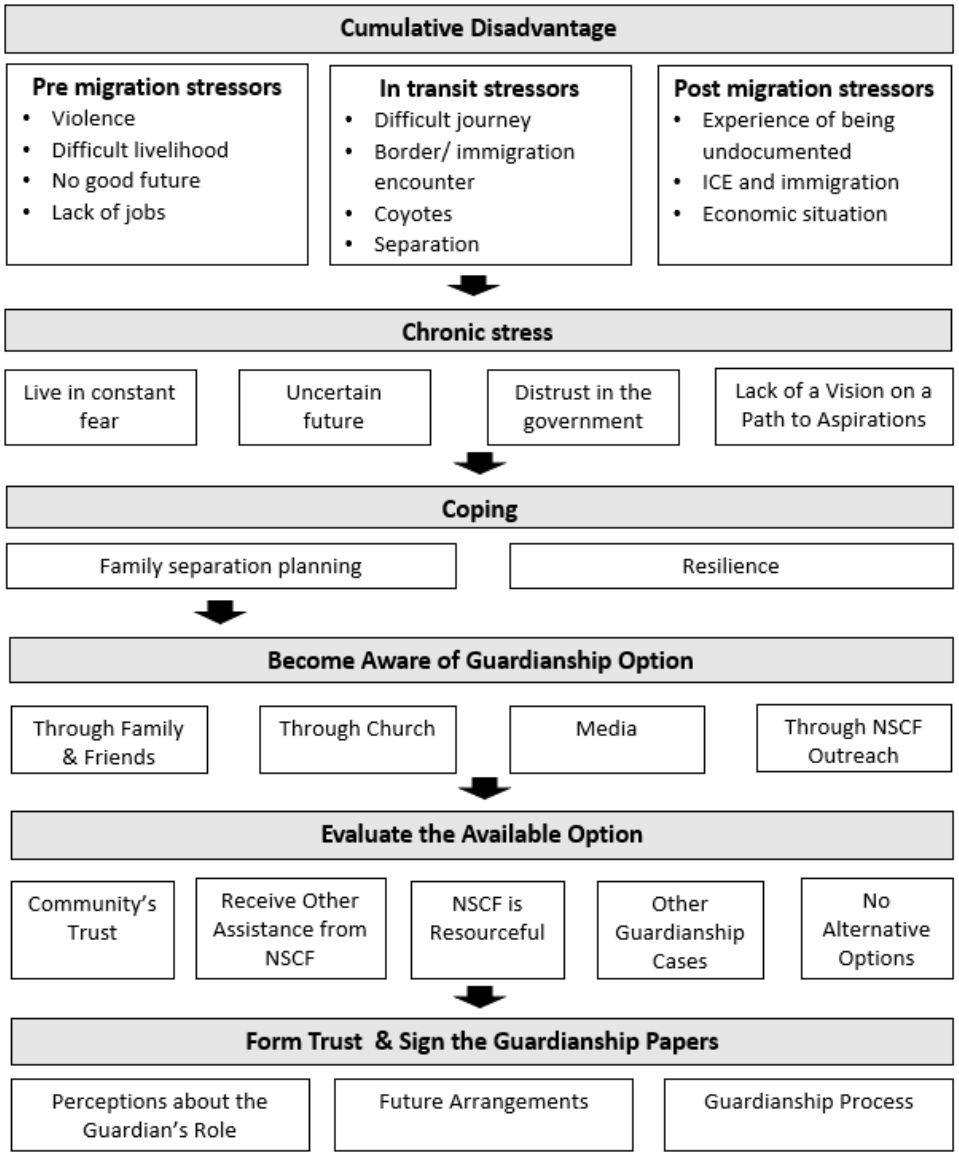

Figure 3. Decision to Assign a Guardian

The model first describes the context in which the parents have lived and comprises their experiences before migration, during migration, and post-migration. This context lays out the social and environmental factors and stressors that impact parents' psychological state, which possibly influenced their decision to assign a guardian. These chronic adverse disadvantages cause the parents to live in constant fear, uncertainty about the future, distrust in authorities, and inability to dream for the future of themselves or their children. Then, the model describes their coping mechanisms, including their separation planning and sources of resilience. Family separation planning has a known element, assigning a guardian, which in most cases becomes an option when the parents find out about the available option for their fear of separation in the community. After identifying the available option, the parents evaluate it. They conclude that the person is trustworthy because they assess that she is already helping separated families. The community trusts her, the family is already receiving other services from her, and she is resourceful. Then, after trust forms, they decide to assign Nora Sandigo as the guardian of their children, make arrangements, and sign the guardianship papers. This model provides a theory grounded on the data collected from research participants on what factors contribute to their decision making, how they find the solution, how they evaluate it, and finally, how they execute it. The results related to each theme are presented next.

Cumulative disadvantage

The cumulative disadvantage refers to the buildup of stress associated with vulnerable socioeconomic and legal trajectories. It includes parents' lived experience before, during, and after migration which lays out the context in which they decided to assign a guardian for their children.

Pre-migration Stressors. A variety of factors influenced parents' decisions to migrate to the US. The majority of the respondents (18) said they migrated to the US to seek a better life. The reasons for migration were primarily difficulties in livelihood (14), violence (14), and lack of jobs (10). A few women (5) also mentioned that they immigrated to the US to work and send money back to their parents. The respondents mainly described their lives before migration as sad and without a promising future.

> *We came here because of the children, to keep them safe and give them a better future. Because at home we did not have money…and because I wanted everything that I didn't have. Because in my country there is nothing and there is a lot of violation…and I come here for those things too.*
>
> Interviewee # 5, 28, Guatemala

Many parents, who had lived in poverty before they migrated to the US, were also exposed to gang-related or political violence. A 64-year-old woman from El Salvador described that as "running from our countries in fear of getting murdered or dying of hunger." Having endured a great deal of stress because of "physical and psychological violence" and limited income, the parents decided to take the risk to find a better life elsewhere.

> *In our country, there are jobs, but the amount you make is very low. There's no way to earn a substantial living that can enable future growth. We can make enough for food, but it's not enough to create a better future. We need to do more, but it's just not possible there. But here, that's why we came. We came knowing we'd have to fight for ourselves, but that at least we have a chance at creating a better future for ourselves…We risk our lives and suffer on the way here, on our way here to fight for a better future.*
>
> Interviewee # 3, 48, Guatemala

Some women also mentioned having experienced domestic violence from their family members, including fathers, spouses, or in-laws. For example, a 49-year-old

woman from El Salvador said that she had reported her abusive husband to the authorities in her country, but the problem was not solved.

> *I was facing a lot of domestic violence from my husband. I had previously reported him to the authorities. The judge of my town would just put him in jail for 6 or 8 days and would then send him back home. I felt lost. I didn't know what to do. I had already endured so much suffering. He would hit me, and he would hit my children.*
>
> Interviewee # 2, 49, El Salvador

Another woman, 34, from Guatemala, said she fled because of her violent father-in-law and came to the US.

> *I came here because of fear. I faced many, many personal threats from the children's grandfather. So, for that reason, I was very scared and afraid because I could not walk freely in my country because every time we would go out, we did not know if we could go back to the house safely. No security in going in and out of the house…. That fear and that fear was just very, very difficult.*
>
> Interviewee # 14, 34, Guatemala

Some women also talked about sexual and physical assault that either they or their children faced in their home countries. For example, interviewee #18, a 41 year old Mexican woman, said that she came to the US first and left her children behind until she could find a way to bring them. But, her 18-year-old daughter was raped, and it was then that she told the daughter to take the risk and cross the border. At the border, she was not admitted and was returned to Mexico.

In-transit Stressors. After deciding to migrate to the US, the respondents must next choose how best to migrate. Most of them endured extreme hardships, stress, and fear during their journey to the US.

> *The only way is how my daughter came, but she has also suffered to cross all of Mexico, and it is scary. In addition, crossing all that is all that place is the Rio Grande that there are many people who have died in that place*.
>
> Interviewee # 20, 36, Guatemala

> *They suffer a lot, as people go through in the desert, how we went through… because my big boy still remembers how we went through, hungry, cold, sleepy, stuck in a truck, like an animal and all that.*
>
> Interviewee # 22, 29, Guatemala

> *Well, we were being guided by the border by someone, who then abandoned us along the way. We had been without food and water for a week when we were found and taken by ICE…. I can't remember much, because of how scared and anxious I was. I was trembling and can't remember much else. What grabbed me was my fear.*
>
> Interviewee # 9, 41, Mexico

> *The way we took was deadly. So it was quite ugly because all those people who were lying in the desert had a dream. They left for a dream, so it is so difficult to remember all those things. It affects me to this day.*
>
> Intreviewee #25, 39, Mexico

Some were caught by the border patrol and sent back. They then had to go through the same stressful and dangerous journey again.

> Interviewer: *And after they took you, what happened? Did they let you go, did you sign any papers, what happened?*
> Interviewee # 9: *They took us to a jail cell one day and after that, they deported us.*
> Interviewer: *Then, you came back?*
> Interviewee # 9: *Yes, we tried sometimes later, and we passed. But, as I said, I do not remember the details. All I remember was that I was so scared.*

Another woman who was returned and came back was a 30-year-old woman from Mexico who tried to cross the border when she was nine months pregnant. She wanted to give birth to her child in the US.

> *I was already pregnant. I was nine months pregnant when I came…. I was taken by immigration. I told them that I was about to have my son, but they returned me back. Then, I was helped again cross the border, and this time I was able to enter.*
>
> Interviewee # 21, 30, Mexico

Often, the families had to pay coyotes to help them cross the border. According to the families, the coyotes would ask for a significant amount to be paid for each person. Therefore, many of them had to sell their already modest possessions or borrow money to

be able to cross the border. A couple from Guatemala said they had to pay $13,000 to the coyotes to get them across the border. Another woman said that they had to mortgage the piece of land they had in Guatemala to take a loan to pay the coyotes.

Moreover, it is common for many parents to migrate to the US without their children and leave their children behind in the care of extended family members or older children. Then, after they achieve some stability or manage to earn enough money to pay for the migration expenses of children, the children follow. As such, many families experienced family separation during the process of migration. In this study, six interviewees mentioned having children left in their country of origin and were worried about their situation.

> *So now we left our small children, we left four little ones. There is one, who is 3-years-old, 3-years-old. We wanted to bring them here. We screwed up. In Mexico, they were grabbed. I lost money because I paid someone to get them to this side. But in Mexico, there is also an immigration law. Then, they grabbed them and returned them to my country again and put a lawsuit on us that said he couldn't bring them.*
>
> Interviewees #20, 36 and 35 year old couple, Guatemala

There were also five participants who either experienced separation from their children when crossing the border or had to have their children travel alone or with another family member to join them in the United States. So the children experienced migration without their parents. For these children, according to their parents, the migration experience was challenging. A 30-year-old interviewee from Guatemala explained that she came first with her toddler son, and then her husband and 7-year-old daughter followed them. At the border, the husband was deported back, and the girl was sent to a child welfare agency in Michigan. The 7-year old girl was in the care of the child welfare system for two months. The mother said:

> *My daughter was crying all the time in the shelter. She would call me every day and cry every time saying it was because of her…. It was because of her… that this happened…*

Another woman who also had her three daughters follow her to the US explained that she left her children in Mexico so that she could work here and save money to be able to bring them one by one, but her oldest daughter was raped, and that forced her to ask them to cross the border. At the border, the oldest girl, who was already 18, was returned to Mexico, and the two little ones were sent to child welfare.

> *She says, Mom, I was treated very badly, worse than an animal. They thought I didn't understand what they spoke in English, but I did understand, and they didn't give me a chance to speak. Simply because you are Mexican, they said, no, not you…. because if you are Salvadoran or Honduran, they would let you go to like an office to take all your information, and with me as a Mexican, they never let me speak. They never let me get there in the presence of a judge. They just told me no, that they were going to deport me.*

Post-migration Stressors. After migration and resettling in the US, newly arrived immigrants are exposed to multiple stressors. The participants in this study referred to different sources of stress and worries. The majority of stressors were directly related to being undocumented and not having legal status, which created significant barriers to getting well-paid employment (13), driving (8) and traveling (14), and difficulties in seeking health care (9). Other frequently mentioned sources of stress were racism and discrimination (9), language barriers (7), and gender-based and domestic violence (3).

Employment. Difficulties with getting a job, low-paid jobs, long working hours, and harsh work conditions were issues that created challenges for the participants. A 27-year-old woman from Guatemala who did not have a job said:

> *The hardest thing about being undocumented is that they don't give you work. When they know you do not have papers, they say they cannot provide work. They are scared that the police would trouble them. If you cannot have a good job, you*

cannot provide food for your family. You cannot pay rent, go to the hospital when you are sick... and a lot of other things you cannot do.

There are not many work options, and they have to take whatever job is open and accepts workers without documents. They can negotiate neither the conditions nor the pay. A few of them who talked about their wages mentioned that they make up to $300 a week for long shifts.

> *It is very difficult because in companies, for example, where I am working, I am not treated… I am thankful to them for giving me work and everything but the treatment, …. The condition is that if you don't work fast, at speed they ask you, they will fire you. So to a person with documents, no. This person who has a document can take his time, and nothing happens. But the people we don't have are not treated fairly because they know that you're not going to leave, that you're always going to be working there.*
>
> Intreviewee #25, 39, Mexico

> *Right now we get by day by day. The money we get at work is very little for a lot of work and then we are paying a lot of rent for the house and the car... We always get by day by day.*
>
> Intreviewee #23, 24, El Salvador

> *Here you have to work 12 hours, 10 hours. You must have grown a skin, a thick skin. It's really hard effort. But we come to fight here because we do not come to rest but to fight.*
>
> Interviewee # 20, 36, Guatemala

NSCF staff and volunteers also talked about the economic challenges that the families have. They confirmed that many families struggle in their everyday lives even for "buying food and other necessary stuff." They said they sometimes have to scramble to provide emergency housing for a family who can not afford to pay the rent.

Restricted Mobility. The other frequently mentioned source of stress and worry was related to driving and traveling. State and federal laws limit the mobility of undocumented immigrants mainly because undocumented immigrants are unable to

obtain driver's licenses. Driving without a license puts them at risk of getting caught and reported to ICE.

> *I fear that, just as my husband was deported in 2016, that I too will be caught driving without a license. And so, with that fear that I too will be deported and separated from my children…I am always changing the route I take. Because you can't know that maybe if you pass by the same road, well you can't know.*
>
> Interviewee # 10, 34, Mexico

> *For example, I can't take my children to other places on a trip. Let's say from here to another state. I'm afraid to take them out…I always walk in fear in the streets, I also go to work with fear in the streets. On the roads, when I walk, I say, I hope the police do not look at me, or stop me, I say, I have to be doing things well. I'm scared, very scared.*
>
> Interviewee # 15, 39, Nicaragua

> *When you find out immigration is doing something, when they are somewhere, you start cornering yourself, you start going a different route, you go a different way hiding yourself. And you have to be careful, for this you have to be aware about what the contacts say because people tell one another.*
>
> Interviewee # 17, 55, Mexico

> *I go out with my car, and I don't have a license. Yes, it affects me because when I leave the house, I do not know if I return home or maybe they take me to jail…because I know that I am committing an offense, driving without a license, but I have no other choice. I need to drive to go to work.*
>
> Interviewee # 25, 39, Mexico

> *It's hard not to have papers because you're afraid to go on the street and get caught by immigration. Because then it's over. Your life here would be over.*
>
> Interviewee # 11, 38, Guatemala

Also, because of the extremely hard journey of entering the US, most of them do not travel back to their countries even if it is necessary.

> *It's very saddening. What hurts the most is not being able to see our family. That's what hurts the most. Not being able to see our family. It's been a long time since I last saw them… Without papers, we are trapped.*
>
> Interviewee # 3, 48, Guatemala

> *I think that it's difficult because you can't visit your country and see your family. You can't go out, and you can't see your family. Imagine not being able to get out much. That's why it's difficult, yes.*

Interviewee # 8, 42, Guatemala

Difficulties in Seeking Healthcare. Some participants specifically referred to the difficulties in seeking health care and issues with health insurance due to being undocumented.

> *It isn't easy. Like, when you get sick, you go to the hospital. There, at the hospital, they ask you for insurance.*
>
> Interviewee # 7, 37, Mexico

> *There are times when you get sick from working so hard; sometimes you get sick. A case of mine, I got sick right now. Not me, I'm hardly working because I have pain here in my back. It has been almost a year and a half since she came, which does not go away, I went to the hospital to take tests, and they asked me if I had insurance. I don't have insurance. I don't have.*
>
> Interviewee # 20, 35, Guatemala

A 25-year-old woman from El Salvador talked about how not having social security number makes her distressed when seeking healthcare for herself or her children:

> *Without papers, I can't be helped if there is an emergency. It can affect us in every way. And I am also afraid to take the children to the hospital because sometimes I have to take children to hospitals, because I am afraid to take them or because I do not have Social Security [number].*

A few respondents dealt with complicated health issues either for themselves or their children, which stressed them. For example, a 42-year-old Guatemalan woman and her 7-year-old daughter both were fighting cancer. Another woman, 30 years old from Mexico, had a son with a rare health condition, hematoma of the liver, and had to "go from one hospital to another" and deal with many complicated issues, including not being able to work because of "taking the little one back and forth between hospitals."

Racism and Discrimination. Some participants referred to unfair treatment from other people, at work, or by the authorities. They perceived such treatment as being

related to their undocumented status. At work, because of their undocumented status, they get discriminated against. One of the interviewees said:

> *There are times when an employer tells you that because you are undocumented, they will pay you this amount. But another person comes through and because they have papers, they are paid more than you. And it's the same exact work. Those are just a few of the injustices we face. And there are more. There are many more.*
>
> Interviewee # 19, 64, Honduras

> *I've been discriminated against at work. I was attacked at work, that is, it was an assault... What is that called? Aggression at work. I was physically assaulted at work…and well, you can't really do anything in that case because calling the authorities doesn't do anything. You report it and they do nothing saying that, well, you don't have any documents. And well, due to this, many things have happened to me while at work. And I think, wow, this happened because I am an immigrant. You can't do anything because you're an immigrant. You have no rights.*
>
> Interviewee # 10, 34, Mexico

> *For example, recently it happened to me and yes, I felt a little uncomfortable and maybe at that time I did not cry, but when I left there I cried that I went to the post office to pick up a package. When I got there, the lady told me to show her an ID, and I showed her the Mexico license, a Mexican ID … And she said, no, you can't use this ID, because we're not Mexican, we're American, you don't have to use an ID from your country. I told her, but I was given it here in Miami, at the Mexican consulate... I felt uncomfortable, I didn't say more to the lady, but I did leave there a little bit like sad and when I was in the car I did leave crying*.
>
> Interviewee # 24, 37, Mexico

Some talked about unfair treatment by the police. A 30-year-old Mexican woman specifically was appalled by the police treatment of her husband in front of their children. They were stopped because of a seatbelt violation and her husband was taken away for "being a public danger." She said they hired a lawyer and won the case, but the children have feared the police ever since. Another woman, 49 years old from El Salvador, also complained about unfair police treatment of her husband, who had a temporary work permit.

The police searched him and took his wallet. They didn't ask him. They just stopped him, forced him out, and searched him. My husband had five people in the car. They were all stopped and forced out. Two of them already had immigration papers. But they were all forced out, and all of them were taken into custody.

Language Barriers. Several respondents referred to language barriers as a source of stress and discomfort. Limited English and sometimes Spanish language proficiency make it very difficult to keep up with their children's development.

I cannot speak in English. And we also cannot fully express ourselves in Spanish because we have a dialect, and it affects us a lot.

Interviewee # 6, 27, Guatemala

The issue that I am dealing with now is that I do not know how to speak English and I need to help my child to do homework. The little I know is because my child teaches me.

Interviewee # 21, 30, Mexico

Having had to work for long hours and other day-to-day issues pose a challenge for them to learn English.

Well, I would like to study. Keep preparing, but I can't anymore because I have to work, I have to look around my house and pay the expenses and all that. Studying is already a lot and then coming home from work tired, because I come dead from working, every day, so I would not have time for this, and what I would like to learn is English.

Interviewee # 25, 39, Mexico

One NSCF volunteer who interacts directly with the families confirmed families' language issues. She said that "most families speak some Spanish because this is how they can survive living in the US, but many of them have difficulties understanding and communicating." She further referred to cultural barriers and that "the families do not feel they belong to this society." Another volunteer also said that "they have a communication problem. Sometimes they do not understand what others say, and they also can not communicate their emotions and their thoughts in a precise way." One of the staff said,

"they speak their Indian languages because they come from some Indian communities in their country, especially from Central America…So it was kind of interesting because then we would need somebody who would speak their languages so that we could communicate with these families."

Gender-based and Domestic Violence. Even after migration and settlement in the US, some participants stated that they or their children had faced gender-based and domestic violence. Interviewee #14, 34 years old from Guatemala, who faced domestic violence from her in-laws when she was in Guatemala, said that after she and her two children escaped and came to the US, her husband followed them and found where they lived in Miami, and attempted to kill her.

> *I don't know how my children's father found out that we had arrived here. He found out and came to the rental where we were staying, and he wanted to kill me. So, since I had just arrived here, I had no experience of anything like calling the police, immigration, or something. So, I went to the immigration office, I told them that I wanted to change my address because I was afraid of him, because if it hadn't been for my children, the children's father would have killed me.*

She and her children were then placed in a safe house for two months. Another woman, interviewee # 26, 30 years old from Guatemala, also faced domestic violence, and she reported her violent husband to the police. As a result, the husband was deported, and now she had to carry the family's financial burden alone.

> *I told them not to deport him, to take him to the treatment of Alcoholics Anonymous… and us too. I wanted them to give therapy to him like children…. Well, when my husband was there, he helped me with the rent. He did drink, but when he was healthy, he was a good person, but when he drank, I don't know, he had a character, but when he was healthy, he cooked for everyone, and he gave me for rent. And now that he is gone, I have to pay the rent and everything alone. It is very difficult because the children are very young.*

Another participant said that her 15-year-old daughter was sexually assaulted and attempted suicide. She said she did not know how to deal with the situation and that even though the daughter was receiving professional help, she did not know how to treat or what to do to make her feel better.

> *Well, it's been a year since she made an attempt to take her life. Yes, and then it's a legal process, I don't know if it was rape or what do I know, but it was something very, very hard, very hard, that sometimes there are adults who take advantage of children. Oh, yes. And she's still depressed ….I do have a hard time getting her out of the house.*
>
> Interviewee # 25, 39, Mexico

Immigration Enforcement. Sixty-three percent of the participants said they had encountered immigration enforcement authorities. Such encounters often negatively impact adults and children. Those women who experienced the deportation of their husbands (7) described the experience as very distressing and expressed that their lives had become extremely difficult after the deportation of their spouses. Interviewee #11, explained that life was difficult after her husband's deportation because "at that time he was the only one working and when he was deported" the family was "left without anything." With four children, she "had to find ways to bring food" to her family. Another woman, interviewee #10 from Mexico, described her life after her experience like this:

> *Well, one day, immigration came to the front door, arrested my husband. We'd been separated because he was deported in 2016. And so, that's when a new life began for me. Because one really suffers when they get separated from their spouse. More so because there are children in the midst. So, that situation really affected me. And I wasn't the only one affected, my children were traumatized for having been separated from their father…And it really wasn't easy for me. I was a single working mother. It really wasn't easy.*

Four participants said they had either an active case with immigration court or had been deported once and reentered the US, and six experienced separations from their children. Separation from children, especially when the child was in the care of child welfare agencies, seemed to be most disturbing for the parents. Interviewee #13 was a 30-year-old Guatemalan woman who came to the US with her infant son. Her husband and 7-year-old daughter tried to enter the country later, but at the border, the father was deported, and the girl was sent to the child welfare system in Michigan while her mother was in Miami. It took her more than two months to get reunited with her child. She described her feeling:

> *Well, I felt very sad because my daughter, it was the first time she was separated from us, because she was crying desperate and well that was terrible. Every morning I cried in bed because she was alone.*

Interviewee #20, the couple from Guatemala who had come to the US without their children to work, had paid someone to take their daughter across the border. The daughter was sent to Arizona to stay in a temporary shelter. The woman described her feeling:

> *I feel sorry for my girl who came, I got a headache the day before, I started to think, where is she? When immigration caught her for three days, I thought, where is she? When they called. Then I got a headache, here and on my face...[she cries]*

Chronic stress

Exposure to multiple stressors during migration causes the families to live in stress. The participants in this study talked about the persistent worry and stress they feel in their day-to-day lives. This chronic stress was evident in their description of life in

constant fear, uncertainty about the future, distrust of the government, and lack of a vision on a path to aspiration.

Living in Constant Fear. The majority of the participants (17) mentioned that they live in fear of immigration enforcement and getting separated from their children. All participants, including those who had not had any encounters with the authorities, showed great fear about ICE and immigration enforcement. One of the participants described that fear very well:

> *Well, to start, we all worry. We'd go out and walk around the city and we'd feel worried that we'd get stopped by the police. We'd feel fear, fear of getting stopped. And, well, we'd have the worry on our minds. I know that living that kind of life is not healthy. What's healthy is to live in peace. To be able to lie down in bed and know that tomorrow I will be safe. Well, every day we felt fear. Fear that we'd be found and taken.*
>
> Interviewee #2, 49, El Salvador

The fear seems to be grafted in their day-to-day activities, especially if there is a risk of identification. Another participant, interviewee #9, 41 years old from Mexico, described it as "living in fear. Fear of going out, of not being able to get a better job, of not being able to drive without a license and all of that." Interviewee #12 said, "Well, when there are no raids, we're fine. But when they even talk about immigration, yes, we are afraid, more than anything for our children here." Interviewee #3 said that "the hardest part is the fear of whether we will come home that night." They well know that their life "would be over" if they get caught.

The fear is so deep and internalized for them that even those who managed to get papers still feel it.

> *It wasn't easy. Even when you have papers, life can be hard. Because you are always in fear that they could revoke your paper.*
>
> Interviewee #2, 49, El Salvador

> *I am always worried about deportation. Even though I have papers, I am still not from here, and there are always things happening, you never know, and you never can be sure.*
>
> Interviewee #23, 24, El Salvador

That fear is especially evident when they talk about driving. Driving puts them at potential risk of identification, and so when they talked about fear in their everyday lives, it was mainly associated with driving and mobility.

Uncertain Future. Living with persistent fear and exposure to many stressors, many participants felt uncertainty, especially about the future. One participant, interviewee #4, said that is "because we don't know when we are going to encounter ICE." Other participants described that uncertainty as not being able to do what other people can do:

> *Sometimes, I don't know. I'm just on the road, but I don't know where I am. I don't understand my life, I don't understand how I live, but more than just I ask God to give me strength to continue where I am living, because I am living in a struggle, in a trial.*
>
> Interviewee # 22, 29 Guatemala

> It's *somewhat difficult. You can't go out, you can't leave the house much. You can't travel or do many other things. It's really difficult. It isn't easy being here without papers. Imagine I need to go out and run some errands. But I can't. I can't go out and just see what happens.*
>
> Interviewee #8, 42, Guatemala

Interviewee #26 recounted uncertainty as insecurity and said:

> *Well, we live in insecurity here because anything can happen, or the police can get you, and the first thing they ask for is a permit, and we do not have it, and they can deport us, and those who remain here are the children without parents.*
>
> Interviewee #26, 30, Guatemala

Another participant talked about the uncertain future of children if she gets deported:

> *And the hardest thing about being undocumented is that one works hidden for the children. We do not have papers, and if at one point I am grabbed by the immigration, and they deport us, then what will become of my children?*

Interviewee # 22, 29, Guatemala

Distrust in the Government. When discussing worries and fear about an uncertain future, most participants feared separation from their children. They were explicitly afraid that their children would "get stuck" here. They did not trust the government. Such distrust in the government was especially evident when they discussed their encounters with child welfare agencies, health care providers, and the police. Interviewee # 18 from Mexico had her daughters in the child welfare for 50 days after crossing the border to join her in the US. She explained that her family was suspicious about the government and told her that the children were taken away from her permanently and that the government would never give them back to her. "They said that the government had taken the girls from me and that they were never going to give them back to me." Lack of communication or degrading treatment that the parents had received from government officials is another reason for their distrust in government. Interviewee #18 explained, "the social worker that I had, that woman was like having a little knife in her neck, she didn't cut me, she just hurt me, she hurt me and I had to do what she said, because somehow it was the only way to get my daughters back." She further described her caseworker as "an executioner, a very severe person. She was like … policemen. So, I just had to obey. I was a robot to what she told me. She was like: 'I tell you this you do, period. I want this, and I want it now." Another participant, Interviewee #22, who also had her daughter with the child welfare, said that "the government doesn't tell us anything, we don't know where she is, we've been in this for two months." A third interviewee who also had her daughters in child welfare for two months described their treatment as

> *I told her to repatriate my daughters and I will go back to Mexico. I told her I don't care, this country did not give birth to me, she says then go away, go any time you want. I said Ah, well, I know that I can go, I can go. But I'm telling you to repatriate my daughters and I'm going with them, that's how I want to leave the country. And if you want to punish me, then I never can return to this country, I accept it with enthusiasm, but give me my daughters.*

There is also distrust in the police and worries that the police would cooperate with the immigration authorities and deport them back. For example, in the case of interviewee #26, who had called the police to report her violent husband, the police reported the man to the immigration authorities, and therefore, he was deported. She said that she had begged the police "not to deport him but to give him therapy." She further said that the police assured her and her son that "they were not going to deport him and that he was going to leave, but that he was not going to approach us because he had a restraining order." Another woman, interviewee #4, explained about an ICE raid on one early morning, and she, who was scared, called the Homestead police for protection and that the police assured her that she could open the door for him when they arrived, but once she opened the door for the police, the ICE also entered armed (see the quote on page 68).

Interviewee # 2 talked about difficulties in seeking healthcare and mentioned that she was not explained her son's treatment and associated costs. "Because they don't explain why things are done. No, no, they just say you are not entitled without caring to explain. We are treated like second-class people… They take advantage of the kids whose parents are undocumented. That they overcharge them and put the families in these difficult situations." Interviewee #20 also referred to lack of respect or care from healthcare staff when seeking healthcare and that he thought is because "they don't care."

The lack of trust also appears to be related to governmental policies concerning immigrants. Interviewee #17 said, "it depends on the government, of course, because you see, the other one [previous administration] didn't pay a lot of attention to us, and now we will see how this new president cares…like if they pay more attention to us… We saw how all the children were at the border, caged. But well, let's see how we go with this new president." The level of distrust in the government is to the extent that some participants who had managed to get legal papers believed that those rights could be revoked at any time. For example, Interviewee # 2 said: "even when you have papers, life can be hard. Because you are always in fear that they could revoke your paper."

Lack of a Vision on a Path to Aspiration. Cumulative disadvantage and living with long-term stress seem to impact parents' aspirations or a lack thereof and parents' inability to plan for the future. When asked about dreams and aspirations, the majority of the respondents mentioned a good future for their children (20), getting legal papers (11), and traveling freely (5). However, they seemed unable to elaborate their dreams further. When discussing their children's future, they mainly referred to building a life for their children so that "they do not suffer as we did," "become somebody in their lives," and "achieve things that we could not."

> *I'd love to see my kids grow up. See them become someone. For example, I wouldn't want them to follow in our footsteps. I'd like to see them grow and learn and go to school. Not work in the fields like us. That's what I would like. To see them be someone in this world.*
>
> Interviewee # 10, 34, Mexico

> *I've lived through that, and so has my family. I've lived that fear, and I don't want my children to have to experience that, ever. I don't want that future for them. I want them to go to school, become professionals, and have a good career. I don't want them to be stuck like me. I want them to have a good life here…We try to be*

as good as possible, not get into trouble, and have all our ducks in a row. It's worth it for them.

Interviewee # 16, 30, Mexico

Another most frequently mentioned aspiration was to have legal papers and be able to "live safer in this country."

My biggest dream is to have documents from here. Be a resident…because at least I already know that I will be in this country safely, without fear of anything. Because then I work without fear. I could take some time outside and walk. Because now I only go to work and then head to the house. That's my biggest wish, to have papers, residency. Well, be 100% sure because you really already have a record, a paper confirming that you are a resident here in the United States. That, for me, would be a great, a great step.

Interviewee # 10, 34, Mexico

She further explained that having a legal status is her wish because it means that "no one is going to do anything to me, I won't get stopped. Even at work, no one will be able to do anything to me."

Many also expressed the ability to travel freely as their greatest wish. Some wished to be able to travel freely to take their children on a trip. For example, interviewee # 7, 37 years old from Mexico, said: "With papers, well, I would take my children to Disney, where I've always wanted to go, but I can't drive there anymore, and there are many other things limiting us." But, most participants wished to be able to travel back to their country of origin and see their loved ones, including their children and parents, or show their children their country of origin. For example, Interviewee # 12 said that she would like to "be able to go see my Dad and my kids that I have there." Another interviewee emphasized that she would like to travel to her country but just to travel and not to stay:

I would like to live a long time in this country, have my documents, of course, and travel to my country, come and go, but I don't want to go to my country just to

> *stay there ... That's my dream …. As I tell you, go to my country and go back, not stay in my country. I would not want to, even if I had the documents because my country is …. very, I do not know how I would say,….very poor.*
>
> Interviewee # 15, 39, Nicaragua

Coping

The families previously expressed that they live in constant fear of deportation because of being undocumented. They also said they are uncertain about the future and do not trust the government. Their dreams and aspirations were directly or indirectly focused on obtaining legal status to overcome the fear of deportation and possible family separation. This theme describes the ways families cope with such chronic stress.

Resilience. The participants talked about sources of their resilience, including religious belief, determination to fight for a better life for their children, and the available help in the community. All participants referred to their religious beliefs, especially when describing their future. It seemed that having a strong religious faith has helped them accept their lived experiences and be hopeful about the future. For example, interviewee #19, 64 years old, from Honduras, said: "we've been lucky to have gotten God's hand helping us along the way. God has always been by our side. He's given us the strength to keep fighting. He's given us the strength to keep moving forward." Another interviewee said:

> *I think all it takes is to think and have faith in God because it is God who can do everything…God is in control of us, and we should not be afraid of anything. So we must not be afraid of anything, if we have papers or not, we must know that without work we will not stay, because without our work in the field, the country can not thrive and we came to this country to work.*
>
> Interviewee #17,55, Mexico

Another woman (Interviewee #22) talked about how having faith helps her move forward: “Sometimes, I don’t understand my life, I don’t understand how I live, but I ask God to give me strength to continue where I am living because I am living in a struggle.” Apart from having faith, many participants referred to the assistance they received in the community and acknowledged that this assistance helped them move forward:

> *I know that God moves us and brings us for a purpose that we do not know. Maybe it’s because God wanted to give us a better life, but today I’m in this country and in this nation. I thank God because the truth is that we are in a country of opportunities, of dreams, and at least I have the dream that my children…. I hope that God will allow us to achieve that dream of one day serving in this country, in this nation, and to be someone, who not only achieve a title, but one day we give back to this nation all the help it has given us, that this nation is great, but thanks to many people who pay and who provide their service and help. So I believe that we are Latino, but that one day we will make a big difference in this country and in this nation.*
>
> Intreviewee #24, 37, Mexico

Another woman whose husband had also been deported talked about the help she received from the neighbors to be able to adjust her life:

> *You see, because when I was alone here, I met many neighbors, you know, they were the ones who helped me at the time, but later, you know it is very different. They told me here," we are going to support you" yes, they supported me, about three months. The same with Norita, she was also able to help me as much as she could.*
>
> Intreviewee #15, 39, Nicaragua

Another participant also referred to the help received in the community in addition to God:

> *We are here, thanks to God, to provide a better future for our family and to fight for a better life…We came knowing we’d have to fight for ourselves, but that at least we have a chance at creating a better future for ourselves. We’re all suffering here while we try and push our family forward and create ourselves a better future. We risk our lives and suffer on the way here, on our way here, to fight for a better future. It’s been thanks to God’s blessing that we are here. He gave us the strength to fight. And we feel so blessed to have so many people*

> *support us and help us move forward here. It's been a real blessing to have so much support as we came to fight for a better life.*
>
> Interviewee #3, 48, Guatemala

They also talked about their determination in fighting and seeking a good life for themselves and their children.

> *The school of life is the best, in life you have to learn many things. Well, when you are afraid, everything is closed to you. Yes, but when there are reasons that in this case I as a mother, I give my life for my children, and as I said, if I have to ask the devil for permission, I ask him. You know what? Give me a chance with my children. I don't care.*
>
> Intreviewee #18, 41, Mexico

> *Well, if they gave us the opportunity or the possibility to stay here, then we or I would decide that I am going to get to work and continue to take my children forward and give them a good education, fighting for them. Save money for them so one day they become someone different.*
>
> Interviewee #14, 34, Guatemala

Several participants also mentioned working hard to save money either to send back home to their loved ones or to be able to bring them to the US.

> *Right now, I am alone because my husband was deported about six years ago. So I am left alone with three children. But I have taken them forward anyway. And that's why I came here, that's why for better thinking, a better future, to help my parents so that they do not have to not always work so hard …and people don't value their work, they don't get paid. Well, then nobody is going to pay them like that, and right now I work, and I always help them, I always help them. Then. Right now, they are old, not so old, but I don't want them to work anymore. I send them every month even if it's a little bit for food and their things and so on.*
>
> Intreviewee #25, 39, Mexico

These factors seem to give them the courage to move forward and continue striving for their primary purpose of providing a good life for their children.

Family Separation Planning. Planning for a possible future separation is a way to cope with the fear of deportation and family separation. Participants were asked to share their plans to be prepared for such a possibility. Except for the decision to appoint a

guardian, which was a selection criterion for participation in this study, most participants (22) did not have any concrete plans. Only two mentioned having thought or discussed financial plans in anticipation of the future family separation. Interviewee #15 said she had started saving money to buy a house in Nicaragua, so she could rely on it if deported. However, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, she had to spend the savings on her family's health and daily expenses. Another woman, interviewee #16, mentioned that she and her partner had planned to open a savings account for children's future education:

> *We're going to start opening up an account for them so that when tomorrow comes, and they're studying, they can have some money there. We want to make sure to be saving something there for them. That's why we want to give them as much as we can in terms of education. And if things become difficult, we want to find a way to have them keep moving forward.*
>
> Intreviewee #16, 30, Mexico

Two participants mentioned having talked with the children's school. Interviewee #7 said: "I have talked to the school. I told his teacher to keep an eye on him. Because we do not have papers and they are deporting many persons." Interviewee # 17 also said: "Well, before, when it was so hard to return to your house because they would catch you on the street, the teachers sometimes knew when we let them know and everything turned out well, you know? They gave a lot of support, help."

Awareness of the guardianship option

All the participants were asked to discuss their decision to assign a guardian for their children in detail. To start, they were asked to explain how they became aware of the availability and possibility of choosing a guardian for their children. They mostly were unaware of guardianship but said once they heard about it, they realized this might be very helpful in their situations.

Family and Friends. Many parents (15) said they heard about the agency and how it helps children of immigrants through their friends, neighbors, and family members.

> *I know her[agency's director] through a friend who told me that, when the raids were going on, she said that she wanted to grant the kids to her. She said, "so in the case by misfortune, I were to get caught by immigration, she would stay fighting for my children."*
>
> Intreviewee #12, 38, Mexico

> *A friend of mine told me that [this agency] helps immigrants….helps children who don't have parents and thank God….and God brought us here. And that is why we are here.*
>
> Interviewee #5, 28, Guatemala

> *My friend told me about her[the agency's director]. She told me that there is a lady who helps undocumented immigrants. I met her when they were deporting many people. We were scared because they were saying that we were going to be deported and the children were going to stay as a child of the government…. So that's why I came.*
>
> Interviewee #7, 37, Mexico

Church. Some participants (3) mentioned that they learned about NSCF services through the church. NSCF is a well-known organization in the Catholic community in South Florida, and sometimes it organizes charitable events jointly with the local church. Interviewee #10 said that she first met NSCF when they were distributing food "at a church in Homestead." When she asked around about their services, she realized that the agency's director was the guardian of many children, and so since her husband had already been deported, she thought about the fear that "the same thing that happened to my husband could one day happen to me." So she decided to have her as her children's guardian. Interviewees #20 also got to know the agency when they reached out to the church for help with their daughter, who was in a temporary governmental shelter after crossing the border to join the family.

We went to ask for help with our little girl because we didn't know how to get her out, and there they told us about Ms. Sandigo. They said she would help get my daughter out and that she had helped many children before… they gave us a number, but we called and it was in English, and we could not understand. So then, we got her number and we managed to talk to her. She asked us to come to visit her and talk.

Interviewees #20, 36, and 35-year-old couple, Guatemala

Organization's Outreach. Some people (3) said that they met the organization when they were in the community distributing food and assistance among the neighbors.

It was around the time of the hurricane. I can't remember which one. My boy was three years old. …Nora was handing out food. And a friend of mine told me to go because they were handing out free food at a house. So we went, and that's where I met her. That's where I signed up to the foundation and started coming over here with her.

Interviewee #16, 30, Mexico

Media. A few participants (3) said they learned about the organization on TV and media. These participants were separated from their children because of migration and the children were in the government's care. They or their friends and relatives had seen programs about Ms. Sandigo on TV and contacted her for help as their last resource and hope. Ms. Sandigo either helped them reunite with their children or was in the process at the time of the interviews.

I have a friend from California who saw Nora on TV. She was talking about a case similar to mine. He told me that he had found this lady with the name of the foundation, and he told me, "I spoke to her, she answered me and gave me all the hopes that she can help you, I have her phone number, talk to her immediately." The girls arrived in New York on a Thursday, and I talked to Nora on Monday.

Intreviewee #18, 41, Mexico

I had the telephone number of Univision of Pennsylvania, where I called, and then a lady came to visit me. She gave me the number of Nora so that Nora could help me get my girl out of immigration and took me to a lawyer. And so, we were like in contact with Nora.

Interviewee # 22, 29 Guatemala

Evaluation of the available option

Participants, who all recognized the fear of future immigration enforcement and the possible family separation, became aware of the guardianship option through the aforementioned channels. The next step for them is to evaluate the available option. Signing the guardianship papers is not a spontaneous decision. Most parents (20) stated that they took their time to consider the option before signing the legal documents.

> *Interviewer: So, once you met her, you kept coming and interacting with her. And slowly, she earned your trust.*
> *Interviewee # 6: About a year later, that's when I gave her guardianship.*
>
> Interviewee #6, 27, Guatemala

> *She never told me to give her custody… I saw her and was getting to know her through, every time she made donations, I'm talking about ten years ago. She gave away food, and I said today more than ever I need it. I always went... And I always talked to her so much. And that decision came from talking to her.*
>
> Interviewee #15, 39, Nicaragua

Only parents already separated from their children (5) and one who was ordered removed had to sign the guardianship papers quickly. Below are the reasons and rationales frequently mentioned by the participants as the factors impacting their decision.

The Community's Trust in the Prospective Guardian. As previously mentioned, most people learned about NSCF through trusted channels, including friends, neighbors, and church. Many participants noted that as an essential factor in trusting Ms. Sandigo.

> *It [the decision to sign gaurdianship] wasn't immediately, it was through time and after I researched Nora through the networks that knew her and all this because I was not like that fast and more than that because she has helped me.*
>
> Interviewee # 15, 39 Nicaragua

> *Well, when I made the decision because, you know, that here it is difficult to find a trustworthy person and I heard a lot about her from people. I've heard a lot*

> *everywhere they talked about her, that she's a good person and she's always helped people too. It doesn't matter what country you are from, she is going to help. She always treats our children as they are her own children…I talked to the families and to the people who were in the same situations, going through the same thing.*
>
> Interviewee # 17, 55, Mexico

The Prospective Guardian's Help to Others. The participants also mentioned that they witnessed how the agency had helped other families dealing with deportation or helped reunify separated families. Interviewee #25 said: "I saw that they did help many children. They had them living here. She [the agency director] would help children if their parents were deported." Another participant, Interviewee # 7, also said that she trusted the agency because they had already helped her friend. Her friend had told her that "there is a lady who helps undocumented immigrants." She reached out to NSCF when many people were getting deported in the community, and she was scared because she thought she might get "deported and the children were going to stay as a child of the government."

The Prospective Guardian is Resourceful. Many participants mentioned that Ms. Sandigo is a resourceful person who knows how to navigate the governmental systems and can provide the support they and their children need. In contrast, their families and friends are not able to provide the same care. Interviewee # 8, whose daughter was dealing with cancer, said that Ms. Sandigo helped her navigate the medical system. "Well, she found us a good doctor at Nicklaus hospital and helped with all paperwork with them… I asked her to be there with me when I wanted to talk with the doctors." Another participant, Interviewee #2, said that Nora helped her with the immigration system:

> *Well, when we came here, I hadn't won the asylum process yet. She helped…And well, she explained everything to us. We were getting many benefits. We got supported and helped more. Let me tell you, I had to call her for help when a short while ago my son-in-law got taken. He doesn't have papers, he's Mexican. And my daughter doesn't have papers either… So, I told her, maybe we should speak to Norita and ask if there would be anything they could help us with. Thank God, we were able to get him out.*
>
> Interviewee # 2, 49, El Salvador

Another participant, whose husband was separated from her daughter at the border and was deported, mentioned that the agency helped find an immigration lawyer and became her husband's sponsor, in addition to helping with reunifying her with her child.

> *Thank God it's almost going to be a year since he's with us. When he was in jail, he had an operation for appendicitis. A week later, he was deported. But thank God he had a lawyer for free, who visited him the prisons. She took his case and filed a lawsuit against the ICE. She won that lawsuit, and for that reason, she brought him back with Nora's help. Nora was his sponsor because we were asked to be received by a person with papers, so I asked Nora, and she helped us.*
>
> Interviewee # 13, 30, Guatemala

Interviewee #18, who was reunited with her two daughters after being placed in a temporary shelter for crossing the border, talked about how the agency director's efforts helped her case, which had been stalled for some time with the child welfare agencies.

> *So, when I talked to Nora like everything started moving again, like she revived the case like the social worker had my document on the desk forgotten, and Nora came and opened the case and grabbed the information again. Because everything was dead, and she started the case again because the social worker was supposedly waiting for information from California, and when Nora arrived, everything changed, everything had another face, and I could already talk to the social worker through her. When Nora sent me to the lawyer, everything changed.*
>
> Interviewee # 18, 41, Mexico

The Prospective Guardian Already Helps. Several participants mentioned that they had received different types of help and support, apart from guardianship from

NSCF, that led them to trust the director as their children's prospective guardian. NSCF supports, as stated by the participants, included food assistance, financial assistance, housing, children's supplies, education and health referrals, computers, legal support, and emotional support. Below are some of the examples:

> *[With my husband deported] it really wasn't easy for me. I was a single working mother. It really wasn't easy. And that was when I got to know Nora. I've known Nora for over six years. I had to find help because I couldn't handle all these kids all alone. And that's when I met Nora, and she gave me a hand without even knowing me. And thank God that she is still helping us. She continues helping me out with the kids, even if it is with food and all that. She has helped me so much.*
>
> Interviewee #10, 34, Mexico

> *Interviewee # 8: I came to get the three little things that Nora gives. I came to the US to work. But since I was diagnosed with cancer back in 2014, I could no longer go and work, and since then, we've been earning much less. But we go on.*
> *Interviewer: What did you come to get from Nora?*
> *Interviewee # 8: One computer for the boy to do his schoolwork and a tablet for my girl and food.*
>
> Interviewee #8, 42, Guatemala

> *She was the only one who helped me. I tell anyone, Nora is a very good person with me and will always be. When she calls me, she tells me, "come, I have some little things, come." Right now, she gave me a computer for the girls, and two years ago, she also gave me computers. She has given me beds, things like that. She is very good to me.*
>
> Interviewee # 5, 28, Guatemala

> *Here, the kids get free supplies and thank God that Nora has afforded us so much support in moments of need. My husband couldn't work when he was taking the little one back and forth between hospitals. We were barely making rent and having enough for bills and other necessities. Nora gave us food, diapers, and so much more. I have so much appreciation for her because it's thanks to her that we've been able to keep moving forward. Slowly but surely, we're finding stability.*
>
> Interviewee # 16, 30, Mexico

> *Thanks to another friend who told us about Ms. Norita, we came here… she said that she helped low-income families like this. She said she could give us a place so we could be here in her house. We already have about two years of being here.*
>
> Interviewee # 14, 34, Guatemala

No Alternatives. Last but certainly not least was that the participants had no other alternatives they trusted as much as they trusted the agency director or who could provide the care and services she offered. Seven participants stated that they had no other option:

> *Interviewer: And if Nora wasn't here to help, do you have any family members who could take care of your children?*
> *Interviewee # 14: No, not here.*
> *Interviewer: Here, you depend entirely on Nora, on her support for any issue that happens to you.*
> *Interviewee #14: Here, I do not have any family, no one…I am only with my three children.*
>
> Interviewee # 14, 34, Guatemala

Four participants mentioned having relatives whom they trusted but who were also undocumented:

> *I have a family. I have brothers and sisters. But they are undocumented, just like me. Like I said, we're here in this country. My children have uncles and aunts here. But, just like me, they are here without papers. And so, due to this, I went to Nora. Just in case, if anything were to happen to me, I would know that they'd be in good hands.*
>
> Interviewee # 10, 34, Mexico

Two said having other options who could not provide the help Ms. Sandigo did:

> *Interviewer: What alternatives did you have. Did you have any family or close relatives? Do you have any other person who could take care of your kids, or was Nora your only option?*
> *Interviewee #9: I have a daughter who's 21, but she can't have all that responsibility on her.*
> *Interviewer: Do you have any family here? Or is it just you and your husband?*
> *Interviewee #12: I have my mom here, but she is in the same situation. My mom doesn't have papers.*
>
> Interviewee # 9, 41, Mexico

> Four women said that they had alternative options but did not trust them:
> *Interviewer: And you don't have another family member or other relatives here in the United States to take care of children?*
> *Interviewee #12: Yes, I have my brother.*
> *Interviewer: Does he have papers?*
> *Interviewee #12: Yes*
> *Interviewer: And why didn't you give the guardianship to your brother?*

> *Interviewee #12: Because we have not seen each other for a long time. He's a man, isn't he? I don't trust him much because I have not been in contact with him for more than 25 years. I haven't, I haven't talked to him. So he doesn't give me the confidence because he's a man.*
>
> Interviewee # 12, 38, Mexico

> *I have some family on the part of the father of my children, but no, I do not feel safe enough to leave them with them, even being family. So I trust Nora more because I know that if one day something happens to me, I am deported, I am sure that my children will be well here. Yes, that she is going to look after my children, maybe she can even send them to me…. that I know, I know that they will be fine with her.*
>
> Interviewee #25, 39, Mexico

Guardianship

After the families concluded their evaluation of the prospective guardian's trustworthiness and abilities to provide care for their children, they made the decision official by signing a legal document (Power of Attorney), which would authorize Ms. Sandigo to act as the legal guardian of their children. Further questions were asked to understand the weight of this decision and explore the parents' perception of what guardianship entails.

Perceptions about Guardian's Role. Most participants did not have a concrete understanding of what guardianship entailed. They did not have a clear picture of the role they wanted the guardian to have in their and their children's lives. It seemed that, for them, a guardian meant a complete substitute for a parent who would provide the same level of care that a parent would. For example, interviewee #4 said, "I feel more confident that she stays with Nora because she's going to give her a roof over her head, food, and maybe send her to a university." Interviewee # 25 said, "I am sure that my children will be well here. Yes, that she is going to look after my children, maybe she can even send them to me. I know that they will be fine with her." Another woman,

Interviewee #26, said, "well, whatever happens to me, she would vouch for the children…Well, I really don't know what she does with children." Interviewee #10 said, "I know that they'd be very safe with Nora if anything were to happen. I know Nora would care for them as if they were her own." Another woman, Interviewee #14, said:

> *I signed something that if something happens, the children could stay with her, or she can claim them… it would be so that one day if I if something happens, she could claim my children and send them there to me or keep them here.*

Future Arrangements. When asked about the arrangements with the guardian, most participants stated that they would want their children to live with the guardian if they get deported.

> *Interviewer: About living arrangements, have you thought who your children would live with if something happens? have you been able to discuss this with Nora?*
> *Interviewee #17: Yes, yes, everything is already in agreement,*
> *Interviewer: What was the resolution?*
> *Interviewee #17: Yes, that as I say, if for some reason immigration stops me or any family members, she takes care of the children, or then they end up living with her.*

However, a few mentioned that if they get deported, they would want the guardian to make arrangements to send the children to them. For example, interviewee #9 said, "whatever happened to me, she would take care of my kids. And in any extreme case, she would help send them back to Mexico." Two other women said the same things:

> *Well, from what we arranged, she [the agency director] said she would give us the support to send us our kids back to our country if the situation arises that she would respond for our children. That's what I need. I need her to help me with that. Hopefully, with God's help, that doesn't happen. But if the situation arises, I will really appreciate what she can do for us.*
>
> Interviewee #3, 48, Guatemala

> *I looked for Nora's help because if I get to be deported one day, I know she is there to care for my children and send them back to me, to my country. So the reason I searched for her was that I wanted to be sure someone would care for the children.*

Interviewee #4, 43, Guatemala

Interviewer: And God forbid if something happens to you, who will your children live with? Are they going to stay with Nora or someone else?
Interviewee #12: Well, mainly with her. And if they deport me, I'd like her to take them to the border. Hopefully not, but if so, I would appreciate it if she would take them to the border so that they could study better there with me. Although it's not better for them because they're studying here, but they're going to be with me.

Interviewee #12, 38, Mexico

A few participants said they had never thought about future arrangements or whom the children would live with.

Interviewer: What else have you done or plan to do to protect your children's future, apart from choosing her as a guardian. Have you made any plans for your children's future living situation?
Interviewee #8: No, not at this time.
Interviewer: If something were to happen to either you or your husband, who would your children live with?
Interviewee #8: We have not talked about that. But, if I am not here to care for our children, I trust she will.

Interviewee #8, 42, Guatemala

Guardianship Process. Participants were asked to explain the guardianship process and paperwork and whether they understood what they signed. Most participants stated that either the guardian or an associate explained the process before signing the papers.

As I told you from the beginning, she explained it to us when she gave us all that. First, she explained to us what the process of providing guardianship of our children was like, right? Then, she made a meeting and explained everything that was going to be the process and all that. Yes, I felt like confident I could sign the guardianship because, after everything she told us, I felt confident enough to give it to her.

Interviewee # 23, 24, El Salvador

Interviewer: How did you feel that the paper process went? Was it hard, was it easy?
Interviewee #21: Uhhh… it was easy. There was a notary there. And just how you told me and are translating, there was someone there explaining everything. They translated and explained everything that was going on, so I understood.

Interviewee # 21, 30, Mexico

Interviewer: What was the procedure like?
Interviewee #11: I was asked to have my and my children's papers ready and sign a paper with the judge.
Interviewer: Ok …And the process when you came, brought your children's papers and you signed the paper. And what was that process like? Was it hard, either hard or easy for you to fill that process?
Interviewee #11: It was difficult, but it's a decision that's not easy….
Interviewer: And did they explain the procedure to you? For you to understand, did they explain what those papers you signed were?
Interviewee #11: Yes, they did

Interviewee #11, 38, Guatemala

Overall, it seems that many parents did not question the process once the families considered her a reliable and trusted person. For example, Interviewee #17 said, "well, I did not think about the process a thousand times, nor did I think about it so much because I tell you, it is the same thing that I told you, I fully trust her." A volunteer shared that "I think sometimes the families do not really understand the guardianship process, although they are explained, and they say they understand. However, they trust Nora and have seen that she puts together the families. They know that she works for their rights." A board member also said, "even though they do not fully understand what Nora does, they see the outcome, they see that she reunites families, she takes care of children when their parents are not there. So they see the outcome, but they don't really process or comprehend the procedure."

Communication with Children

The second research question is "what strategies do the parents use to communicate to the children about their own undocumented status?" It aimed to explore when, how, and if the parents communicate their undocumented status with their children. This question lays out the base for the third research question, which looks into

parents' strategies to communicate their decision about assigning a guardian to their children. These two questions are closely related, and therefore, they will be discussed together. Figure 4 displays parents' strategies in communicating their undocumented status and their decision to choose a guardian for their children.

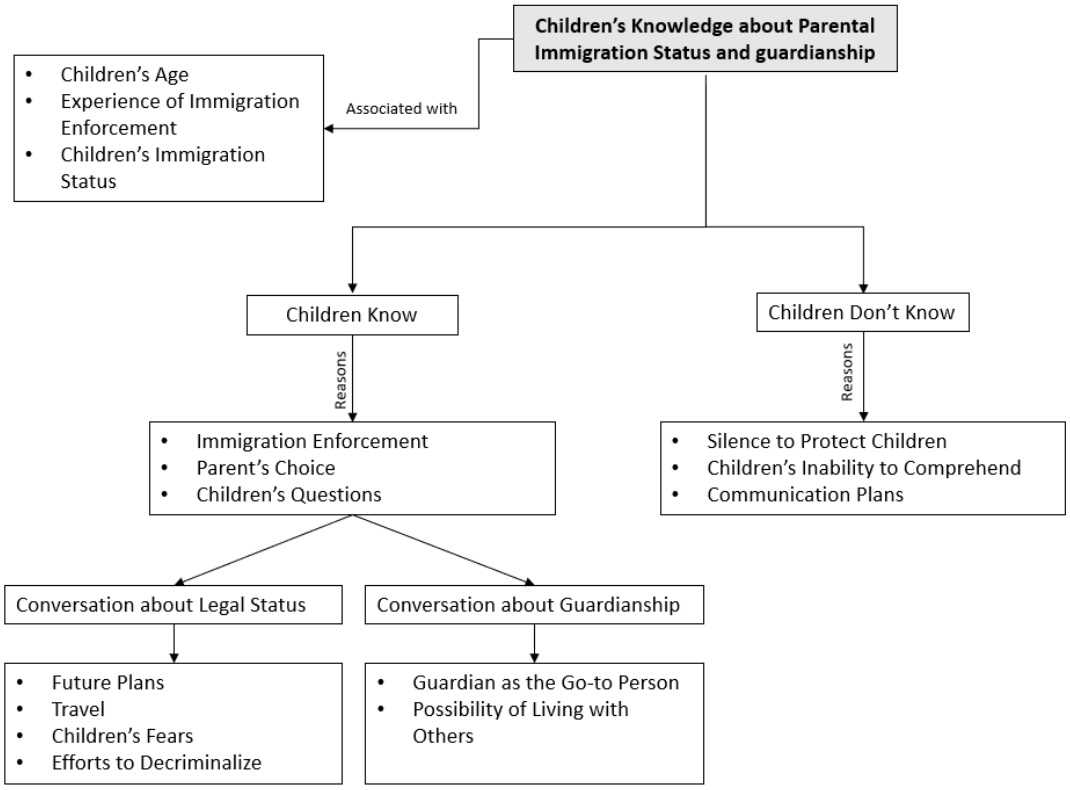

Figure 4. Communication with Children

Children's knowledge of their parent's immigration status and their knowledge about the parents' decision to assign a guardian seemed to be related to the children's immigration enforcement experience, their age, and their immigration status. Children who either experienced immigration enforcement and family separation or had witnessed a parent's arrest or deportation seemed more likely to know their parent's immigration status and their decision to choose a guardian. Also, while younger children were more likely unaware of either of these topics, the older children seemed to know about their

parent's immigration status and have some knowledge about their guardian. However, the extent of their understanding of the guardian role varied case by case. In addition, children's own immigration status was another factor closely related to children's knowledge. If undocumented, children were more likely to know about the notion of living without documents and the risks associated with that.

Children do not know: Reasons and communication plans

Some parents chose not to speak with their children about their legal status or their decision to assign them a guardian. They either stated that they intend to protect their children emotionally or reported that their children were too young to understand the concept of being undocumented and its implications.

Silence to Protect Children. Some parents reported that their children already lived a difficult life and were exposed to different stressors. Therefore, they decided not to further traumatize them by talking about legal status or the possibility of family separation and living with other people.

> *Well, the reason is that I keep what I think and feel alone, I never, never want to put them in fear or dread…Because that is already putting fear in their minds and making them think about bad things, I want them to think about studying, only their studies. Nothing else… Because a lot of things have already happened to us. So to continue to put them in the same situation is complicated. Living without a father is very difficult (Crying) ... I never, never, think that my children would be able to continue to go through the situation without me. My children are growing up right now. They don't worry about anything… I don't want to worry them.*
>
> Interviewee #14, 34, Guatemala

Another woman said, "I don't share it because it's hard to put something in the children's head that they are not to blame for. They would suffer and think that perhaps it is their fault, then I do not tell them anything."

Children's Inability to Comprehend. Several parents said they had not talked about these topics because their children were too small to understand. Most children who did not know were children who had not reached school age. For example, Interviewee #23 said, "Because they are small and do not understand right now, I will explain everything when they grow a little older." Another parent, interviewee #7, said she had tried to start talking with her 4-year-old daughter, but she could not understand it since she was very little.

> *This is not that I sometimes tell her because she says she wants to go to my country, but I tell her that I can't because I'm not from here anymore, and later she will be able to come here, but not me. But she forgets and asks me again as she still does not grasp very well.*
>
> Interviewee #7, 37, Mexico

Communication Plans. When parents stated they had not communicated their legal status or decision about guardianship with their children, they were asked about their communication plans. Most parents did not have any clear plan. Those who mentioned not having talked with their children because they were too young said they would tell the children once "they are older." They mostly did not elaborate further. For instance, Interviewee #1 said, "well, right now, since they are so small, I haven't talked to them, but in a time when they already know things about what it's like here in the United States, I'm just going to tell them." Or, Interviewee #13 said, "when he's going to be older, then yes, one day we're going to tell him about who he is and what happened in our lives. My big girl, yes she knows everything, as she lived it, she experienced everything in her life." However, one parent explained that she had plans to tell her kids gradually:

> *When they're older, I think I'll tell them. They have to be ready for whatever comes. There are moms who make the mistake of not telling their kids. Then they get deported, and the kids don't know what happened. Those kids end up feeling abandoned. So, I think it's better to explain the situation to them. Tell them that they have an amazing opportunity that we just weren't fortunate enough to have. That way, they won't experience the same fears we do. We plan to tell them slowly, so they can understand and not feel frustrated. Because if we just tell them that we may be together one day, but another day, we might not. That might instill some fear. We want to explain things slowly as they get older.*
>
> Interviewee #16, 30, Mexico

Children know: What prompted the conversation

When the participants responded that their children knew about their status and guardianship decision, they were asked to explain what prompted such conversation. Below are the reasons most frequently mentioned by the interviewees:

Immigration Enforcement. Those children who witnessed the deportation of a parent got to know about the notion of being undocumented even at a very young age. Four participants mentioned that their children were exposed to reality when their fathers got arrested and deported.

> *My children found out the day that immigration came to our apartment. That's when immigration grabbed my husband. So when my girls saw my husband handcuffed, they cried. They were all crying, even the oldest was traumatized.*
>
> Interviewee #10, Mexico,34

> *The father of my oldest son was deported. When he got older, he asked about his dad, and I told him. I told all of them. I told them because I think they should know that….that I do not have papers and that I might get deported one day.*
>
> Interviewee #11, 38, Guatemala

Another woman, Interviewee #4, explained that her two children witnessed ICE entering their house at 5 in the morning "showing their guns." Children who were asleep were frightened, especially the older child who was nine at the time:

The older one remembers that when her dad was deported. When she remembers that experience, I see her crying. Well, that was so difficult because when they grab him in front of you, well, of course, you cry because it's a separation. The younger one doesn't always remember her dad, but the older one was nine at the time that her dad was deported

Interviewee #4, 43, Guatemala

Some children experienced immigration enforcement themselves and were separated from their parents for some time. According to the parents (5), they also knew about their parents' status because "they experienced everything in their lives."

Parent's Choice. Some parents mentioned that they chose to talk with their children to prepare them for possible future adverse experiences.

Interviewer: Have you spoken to your children about the possibility of them living with other people if you aren't here?
Interviewee #10: Yes, I've also told them about that. Like I was saying, one has to be honest and sincere with their children. We can't be lying to our children. They're growing up. I tell them that because we can't lie to them. We need to give them the truth. Because if anything happens to me, God forbid, right?

Interviewee #10, 34, Mexico

You tell them from a young age, and from the moment they start these things, you let them know at a young age so that if something happens one day, it won't catch them by surprise either.

Interviewee #17, 55, Mexico

Children's Questions. Often, conversations about legal status and guardianship were prompted by children's questions about legal status. For example, one of the mothers, Interviewee #25, said that her children started asking why she did not apply for credit cards at stores to receive discounts, and she had to explain that it was because "I was not born here, but they are entitled to all their rights. I am here, yes, fighting, getting ahead. But I wasn't born here." Another participant said:

They asked, "Mommy, why weren't you born here? or why do you not have papers?" I told them that I was born in Mexico and that I came here with their grandmother. That I'm not from here, that I'm from Mexico. Then they say,

> *"mommy, we wish you were born here just like us. Then we wouldn't have to be always worried, and nobody could ever take you from us." I don't know what to say.*
>
> Intreviewee #9, 41, Mexico

Another participant said she had to tell her children about immigration status because they asked her about traveling to Mexico.

> *I told them. I told them that we have no papers. Because they asked me, "why don't we go to Mexico when there's family?" [I told them] because if I go…I can go, but if I go, I can't come back because I don't have papers.*
>
> Interviewee #12, 38, Mexico

One participant, Interviewee #5, said that her daughter heard from other people that her parents were undocumented and started asking questions. "She had doubt and concerns…She doesn't trust people and is afraid. She is afraid that we are going to be sent back". Another participant explained that her children overheard her talking with other people about not having legal documents and asked her questions. That was the reason she chose to tell them:

> *Honestly, I have spoken to them with the truth. They know that I have no document and can not apply for various things. They know that perfectly well. It's nothing out of the way, but they know perfectly…They noticed, at first, I didn't want to tell them. But then, as they grew, they saw, they asked, they asked everything. That's how they realized. And I had to explain to them better because I sometimes talked to people…So they saw all that, and I had to tell them. …like they observed, then they would ask me, "Mommy, what happened? You don't have papers?" Then I told them, "I am from Nicaragua, I do not have papers, but there are many people who are not from here and do not have papers…I came to emigrate. There are people who come legally. So I am explaining many things to them, so I came to this country illegally and I don't have papers".*
>
> Intreviewee #15, 39, Nicaragua

Conversation about legal status

Those parents who had talked with their children about their legal status mostly said their conversations were related to future plans, travel, children's fears, and parents' efforts to decriminalize being undocumented.

Future Plans. A few parents said that their conversation about legal status happened when they talked about future plans with their children.

> *He knows because I've talked to him. We've talked to him about this since he was 12 years old. We talk to him about planning something for the future. The most important plan is getting papers. He says that he wants us to live in a bigger house. But I tell him that we cannot because of the same situation that does not let us buy something, because we don't have papers...So I talk to him about it. We tell him that we're working. That later, when he has reached an age, he will be able to have everything. Everything that we're working for, everything is for you kids. We're going to go back [to our country]. But we don't really have any expectations that we'll be able to get papers later on.*
>
> Interviewee #7, 37, Mexico

> *Well, I tell them to study, to learn English and I tell them that we do not have papers, that we cannot be in this country because it is a foreign country. So, I tell them to study, to prepare something here, so that they do not suffer like we do.*
>
> Interviewee #22, 29, Guatemala

Travel. Many interviewees said that the conversation with their children about the legal status was around the issue of traveling, particularly traveling to their country of origin to visit grandparents.

> *My son and I spoke about this before because he said he wanted to see his grandmother and wanted me to go with him. But I've told him that I couldn't go because if I did, I couldn't come back, that I would have to stay because I didn't have papers... And so he asks why we can't, why we can't go and come back together. I tell him that we can't because we came without papers. He says, "that's really sad because I really don't want to go all alone." He says that he wants me to go with him and come back with him.*
>
> Interviewee # 3, 48, Guatemala

> *Interviewer: What was that conversation like? Did you tell them? Did they find out through another way?*

Interviewee #12: I told them. I told them that we had no papers. Because they asked me, "why don't we go to Mexico when there's family?" I told them, "because if I go…I can go, but if I go, I can't come back because I don't have papers".
Interviewer: And how was their reaction? Did they ask any other questions?
Interviewee #12: No, just the girl said that maybe one day she was going to get me papers.

Interviewee # 12, 38, Mexico

I have told my children because they ask me, "mom, why you can not travel? Because I am from another country, and you are from here?" I tell them, "my love, you are from both countries. You can enter the United States if you leave here, but we don't, we're not from here", but we don't call them legal and illegal, because they don't know what that word is. In fact, this morning, I think we were talking about something like that, the boy told me, "I want to go to Mexico. When are we going to go to Mexico to visit my grandparents? Why are my friends going to see their grandparents in Mexico, and we don't?" So then I explained that if we leave, we can no longer return.

Interviewee # 21, 30, Mexico

Children's Fear. Several parents talked about their children's fears, especially about family separation. Interviewee # 9 said her children are afraid of the police: "Sometimes they worry about me not having papers. We come fearfully when we come to see Nora. They worry that we might be stopped by the police, and they find out about me not having papers and send me back to Mexico." Another woman, interviewee #10, explained that the fear transfers from the parents to their children:

They have seen me. My children know about my immigration status because they've seen the fear and terror in my eyes when I drive. When I tell them to sit down straight and not move because there's a police car behind me, they know my fear, what my fear is. The day I get stopped, I hope it isn't a racist policeman that calls immigration. That is my fear. My children know that my fear is to be separated from them. That is a great fear that I have, and they know it.

Intreviewee #10, 34, Mexico

Another participant, whose children had witnessed their dad taken and deported, said:

> *It emotionally upsets her [oldest daughter] because she always remembers when her dad was deported…When she remembers that experience, I see her crying. Well, that was so difficult because when they grab him in front of you, well, of course, you cry because it's a separation. So what always scares her too is that I go out on the street and get separated forever. It's scary that you can still be deported.*
>
> Interviewee # 4, 43, Guatemala

Interviewee #25, whose husband had also been deported, talked about the same fear in her children, fear that their mother might get deported: "They feel bad, and it scares them. It scares them because there are many people who do not return because the police ask for their documents and go to jail because they do not have documents… many cases have been seen. So they always have that in their heads. All three of them." Interviewee # 16 also said the same thing: Children "saw their dad be taken away. And since then, whenever anyone asks them about police officers, they think they are some bad people because they took their dad away".

Those participants whose children had been separated from them also talked about their children's fear and how being separated from parents had impacted their wellbeing. For example, interviewee #13, whose daughter had been separated from her father at the border and placed in temporary housing for over two months, said, "she was crying desperate, and well that was terrible. We talked on the phone every day. She would call me every day and cry every time saying it was because of her…. It was because of her… and she wouldn't leave anymore." Another participant had one of her children pass the border to join her and her other children in the US. The girl was placed in a temporary shelter, and the woman had trouble getting reunited with her. She talked about the reaction of her other children and how this had impacted them:

> *They ask me, "when is she going to come? How will it be? Will she be eating?" They are very desperate not to have their sister here… they tell me, "why is she not there?" They don't want anything to happen to them; they are afraid of losing their sister.*
>
> Interviewee # 22, 29, Guatemala

Efforts to Decriminalize. Many parents mentioned that when they discuss their legal status with their children, they try to make sure that the children do not think that their parents are breaking the law or are criminals. For example, one of the participants said that when she responded to her children's question about why she could not travel back to Mexico, she only explained that she could not return once she left because she was not from the US.

> *I tell them, "my love, you are from both countries. You can enter the United States if you leave here, but we don't, we're not from here", but we don't call them legal and illegal, because they don't know what that word is.*
>
> Interviewee # 21, 30, Mexico

Another participant said that when her husband was being arrested and deported, she told her children that it was not because their dad was a criminal but just because of not having a legal paper that he had been taken.

> *So when my girls saw my husband handcuffed, they cried. They were all crying, even the oldest was traumatized. She asked, "Mom, what's happening? What's happening?". I told her that her dad hadn't done anything wrong, that this was happening because we didn't have papers. I told them because I thought, what will the children think if I don't tell them the truth? They may think that the father was stealing, or I don't know what, but I told them that's the simple reason they were taking their dad.*
>
> Interviewee # 10, 34, Mexico

Interviewee #15 said that when her children first found out about her legal status, they did not understand it and started to speak poorly about her choices, so then she decided to explain what adversity she had to go through to come to the US.

> *They spoke badly. Then it becomes more difficult for them to understand me. But several, several times, I had to explain it to them. For example, I told them how I came [to the US] "And how did you come?" They asked me. "Well, walking, then I caught a bus, then I caught a train, then another bus. After that, I went by boat on the river." ... "Did you come by plane?" They asked me, "no, I came like that…." So they didn't understand, and I explained to them ….I explained step by step, not just once, several times. They always asked me, until now they already understood. They understand that this journey was very difficult, and now they know how I came.*
>
> Interviewee # 15, 39, Nicaragua

Conversation about guardianship

Parents' conversations with their children about guardianship seemed vague and unspecific. Several participants said they had introduced Ms. Sandigo as the trusted person and the one children can go to if something happens. Some who had spoken about possible family separation with their children said they introduced Ms. Sandigo as the person with whom the children would stay. However, they mostly did not provide more information on the actual conversation.

Guardian as the Trusted Person. Communicating that decision to their children might be difficult. Those who talked about their immigration status with their children told them about the guardian as well. However, many parents seemed to have simplified the guardianship concept by merely introducing the guardian as a person children could trust if something happened to them.

> *I already told her that I had assigned her a guardian. She already knows that …they already know that if anything happens to me or of immigration get me, God forbid, they know that Nora will protect them. The older girls already know, the girl who is 12 and the one who is nine already know.*
>
> Interviewee # 12, 38, Mexico

> *I have told them that if anything happened to me, like if I was grabbed by the ICE…that NAME [older daughter] should call Nora for anything. She is the one who has Nora Sandigo's phone number, her address so that if anything happens*

> *to call Nora… She knows all the information. If something happens to me, I am deported. Well, Nora is the one who is in charge of them.*
>
> Interviewee #4, 43, Guatemala

Only a few participants shared more details of their conversations with their children about guardianship. For example, interviewee #25 said that her children questioned her choice of guardian:

> *They have questioned me why I don't give their aunt who lives in Miami, I tell them that "she can visit you and everything and that I respect her, but give her your guardianship, no, Norita is very good with us. I tell you, I have decided that way and I know that you will be fine."*
>
> Interviewee #25, 39, Mexico

Another woman said that her son was worried about guardianship and questioned why she wanted to give them up. She explained:

> *My child is asking me, " why are you going to sign the paper?" He tells me the biggest, who is 13 years old, "why are you giving me away? Why are you giving my birth certificate to the lady?" So I told him, "if, for example, if something happens to me, if they deport me or I die because we don't know life, I tell him, Mrs. Nora is in charge of taking you to our family. Our family are your uncles, your aunts or your grandmother. So I told her if something happens to me, then she would take care of reuniting you with our family." That is what I am saying to the older child because he is asking me. That's what I'm trying to say to him, which is not adoption, I asked my sister to explain. My sister told them that it is as if she were a godmother. Then she explained all that to the child.*
>
> Interviewee # 22, 29, Guatemala

Possibility of Living with Others. A difficult part of the conversation about guardianship is talking about the possibility of living with other people due to family separation. Some said they had skipped this part when taking with their children. For example, Interviewee # 8 said that she had told her children about the guardian but did not discuss the issue of the possibility of them staying with another person. "I've told them about Nora. But we haven't spoken about what would happen if something were to

happen to us. Whether they'd stay with Nora or something else. We haven't spoken about that". Another participant, Interviewee # 3, said that even though her children knew about Ms. Sandigo, they never spoke about the possibility of living with her.

> *Well, that is something that I would need to explain to him. At least I know that he knows [the agency]. I haven't spoken about this to him, but I plan to explain this to him so that he understands the situation. I want him to understand the situation.*
>
> Interviewee # 3, 48, Guatemala

Only a few parents said they had talked with their children about this issue.

> *Interviewer: Did you talk with your children about the possibility of [them] living with other people?*
> *Interviewee #7: Yes*
> *Interviewer: Which ones have you spoken to?*
> *Interviewee #7: With the big boy.*
> *Interviewer: And when you spoke with the oldest, how did he react?*
> *Interviewee #7: I don't know what he thinks.*
> *Interviewer: What does he think about possibly living with someone other than you?*
> *Interviewee #7: It seems like he's fine with it. ...He's the type of boy who doesn't get bothered by anything. Yes. He says that it is ok if he's able to continue studying and everything… because he's a very mature boy, he's very advanced. He's been in the advanced classes since he was little.*
>
> Interviewee # 7, 37, Mexico

Another participant said that she communicated everything with her children since she believed they should hear it from her and get ready for any possibilities.

> *Interviewer: Have you spoken to your children about the possibility of them living with other people if you aren't here?*
> *Interviewee #: Yes, I've also told you about that. Like I was saying, one has to be honest and sincere with their children. We can't be lying to our children. They're growing up. I tell them that, because we can't lie to them. We need to give them the truth. Because if anything happens to me, God forbid, right? So you have to tell your children the day something happens to me, the house that will take care of you is Nora and it may be that you will live with her the day I am gone. That's what I've told my children. That's why they've liked Nora because she treats them like if they were her children.*
>
> Interviewee #10, 34, Mexico

Information Sessions with Staff and Volunteers

The collected data was shared with staff and volunteers of NSCF in several information sessions. Seven volunteers and board members (5 women) were recruited between September and November 2021. They had between three and 19 years of experience working with NSCF. Two were NSCF board members, and the others were volunteers. One volunteer was the public notary who had notarized guardianship documents for many families, and the others were closely involved in the organization's work with the children and their families.

The volunteers and staff were asked to comment on the collected data and discuss their interpretations. They confirmed the collected data and the models that explained the parents' decision-making process. As for constant fear of family separation, they said they had witnessed that fear in the parents and among children. One volunteer said that "what I mostly noticed in the families is the extent of their fear and worries. They are so scared of being separated from their children, and unfortunately, this is something that they hear all the time in the community, on the TV, and it scares them a lot."

They confirmed the ways that families became aware of the guardianship option in the community. One NSCF staff said that "I think word of mouth is the most common way that the families hear about us. People talk to each other and refer to their friends and tell each other that Nora is a reliable person. But also because of her outreach. She visits many families on a regular basis to bring food, love, and help to these people. Also, she [the agency director] helps them in difficult situations like rape, sexual violence, not only the children but the entire family." Another volunteer said, "because she [agency director] has a great background and knowledge about many things. She knows many

people, many lawyers who work in immigration, and she can help much better than their families because the families know nothing about immigration." When asked about why families choose the agency director as the guardian of their children, one volunteer said:

> *My impression is that it is it has a lot to do with trusting Nora. That's what I always thought. That was very clear to me because Nora's Foundation is an established organization, and many families have had many great experiences with Nora and within the community. They know who Nora is and what Nora can do. So they know that Nora is not somebody who's going to be playing with their lives. They know that, and they know that she is somebody that they can trust.*

Another volunteer thought that families trust the agency director because they can interact with her, get to know her, and evaluate her:

> *I think because Nora gets personal with the family, so it's not the organization. Right? It's not Nora Sandigo Children Foundation. It's not the. I was part of the foundation. Many people are part of the foundation. But Nora herself is the face of the foundation. So Nora is very active on a personal level with the families, so they are not talking with a representative of the foundation, right? They're talking to Nora. She feels the pain for the families, and she devotes a lot of her time to help, you know. So when you have somebody in the community who gets involved on a personal level with people suffering. It's been like over 30 years that she has been doing this. So it's not like she started yesterday, last year. So she's been doing this for so, so many, many years as there are kids that she helped. They have graduated the university, they have become professionals and she was an important person to those kids when they needed it the most. So she has a history and it's something that nobody can deny.*

The volunteers also confirmed participants' perceptions of the role of the guardian. For example, the notary at NSCF, who had notarized many guardianship documents, believed that for most families, Ms. Sandigo's guardianship meant replacing their parental role if they got separated from their children.

> *I think my experience confirms that too… I think that is one of the moments that the parents think the most about the consequences of what could happen. So I think it is in a way they feel relieved that they know that if something happens, the kids will be protected so they get emotionally in many different reasons. One of them, of course, because of the situation itself and then maybe because they know that their kids would be fine.*

They were also asked about the guardianship process. The notary who had notarized the guardianship process for many families at NSCF said:

> *I had encountered families that didn't know much about the foundation. They quite didn't understand about guardianship. So when they came to talk to me, I would explain because I think the form has about five or six pages, so I would go page by page with those families I would read. Because the pages are in English, but I had them translated into Spanish, so I would give the translation form to the family so that they would know and, if they want to, could sign the Spanish version. I would go step by step what it said and what it meant so that when they were ready to make a decision, they would understand the responsibilities of Nora and how limited it is because it's not like, you know, it's limited, even though she has a guardianship. But there are some limitations to what she can do within that guardianship and to what age she could help those kids. So the family will come once, and they will come twice.*

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

This chapter discusses the present study's findings in the context of previous literature and the theoretical frameworks that guided the data collection. First, a summary of the results will be presented and interpreted. Then, implications for research, policy, and practice will be discussed. Finally, the limitations of the dissertation will be presented.

Discussion

In removal proceedings, when parents of US citizen children are ordered deported, they face a Solomon's choice: 1) to take the children with them to their country of origin, where the children might never have known, or 2) to leave them behind in the care of others (Zayas & Bradlee, 2014). Either of these choices has limitations that can negatively impact the health and wellbeing of children (Zayas et al., 2015). On the one hand, if they take the children to their countries, children would be deprived of the advantages of living in a developed country like the US (e.g., better educational, social, and health care systems). They would have to adapt to the new society and learn a new language. They would be socially isolated and lose their peer support.

On the other hand, if they leave the children behind, the children might experience psychological distress. They would have to live with other people, and in most extreme cases, they might end up in the care of the child welfare system (Wessler, 2011). Therefore, parents must choose which of these two options they think is in the best interest of their children. Many parents choose a guardian for their children in preparation for such a possibility, so that if they get detained or deported, the guardian will provide care and prevent the parents from losing ties with their children. The primary research

question in this study sought to explore the factors involved in these parents' decision-making process.

RQ1. What factors or processes contribute to undocumented parents' decisions to delegate guardianship of US citizen children?

I used two theoretical frameworks to guide interview questions. First, the pyramid of deportation (Dreby, 2012) was used to explore the context in which undocumented parents plan about their children's guardianship. This theory explains that fear of immigration enforcement impacts immigrants at different levels. Even those who have never experienced immigration enforcement might greatly fear the consequences of possible deportation of themselves or a family member. However, the impacts are far more significant for those who have experienced deportation—psychological distress, economic hardship, and possible family separation. This theory helped capture the context in which parents decided to choose a guardian for their children. Collected data showed that the participants had lived in a cumulative disadvantaged situation for a long time: from before migration to after settlement in the US (see Figure 5).

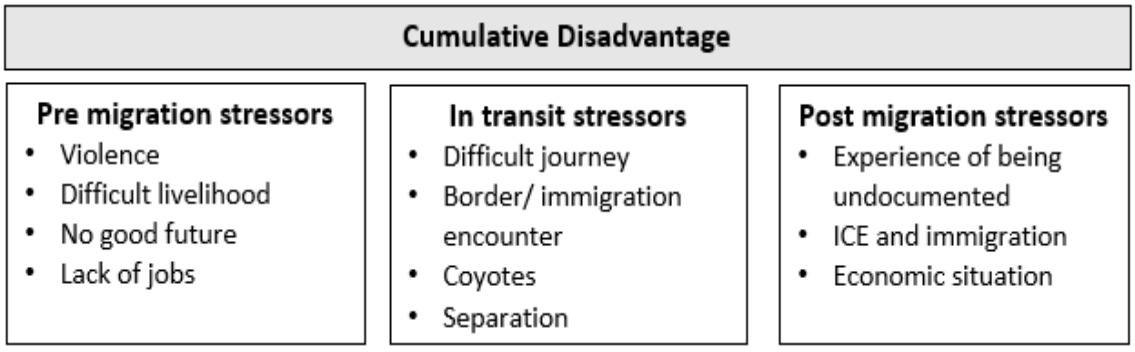

Figure 5. Cumulative Disadvantage

In the migration process, families were exposed to different stressors. Before migration, they experienced economic difficulties, different types of violence and had no

prospect of a good future. Then, they have to take an arduous migration journey facing violence, death, injury, and family separation. Upon resettlement in the US, they experience language and cultural barriers, fear of immigration enforcement, discrimination and racism, poverty, and family separation. These findings are in line with the previous studies that have looked into migration processes (Brabeck et al., 2011; Cervantes et al., 2019; Ornelas et al., 2020; Perreira & Ornelas, 2013). Exposure to migration-related stressors might lead to trauma (Perreira & Ornelas, 2013). Therefore, continuous exposure to migration stressors may create chronic stress. Most participants in this study referred to living in constant fear of deportation and family separation with a great deal of uncertainty toward the future. They also mentioned that they did not trust the government. The fear and stress were even evident in their description of aspirations for themselves and their children. Figure 6 shows the forms of chronic stress. The fear and anxiety about immigration enforcement, expressed by participants in this study, have been previously documented in many studies (Rhodes et al., 2015; Rodriguez et al., 2017; Slayter & Križ, 2015; Stutz et al., 2019).

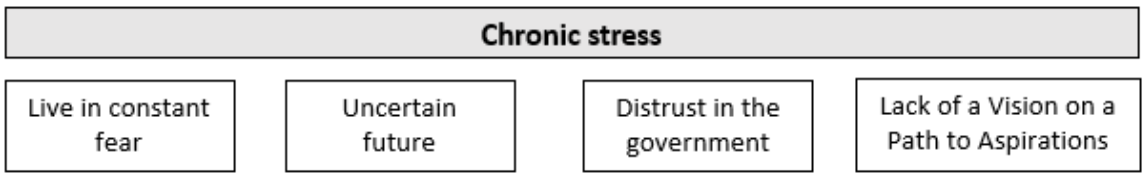

Figure 6. Chronic Stress

The question is how the families cope with such a situation and what measures they take to carry on amid such constant fear (Figure 7). Even though not directly asked, the participants talked about the sources of their resilience. They all mentioned their solid religious belief and strong reliance on their fate determined by God. Likewise, the

interviewees frequently mentioned that another source of resilience was community support and help from neighbors, churches, and community organizations. Both of these factors were also referred to in previous studies. For example, a systematic review found that individual characteristics, family strengths, cultural factors, and community supports were four significant sources of resilience among Latinx immigrant families (Berger Cardoso & Thompson, 2010). Family separation planning is another sub-theme related to coping that helps explain the research question. One of the participants' measures to cope with their fear of family separation is choosing a guardian for their citizen children. They were asked to talk about other measures they have taken. Most participants did not have any concrete plans. Only two mentioned having thought or discussed financial plans and two others said having talked with the children's school.

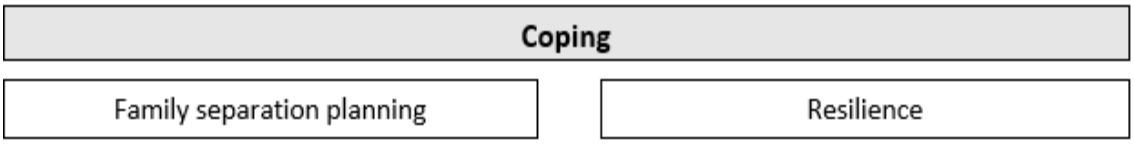

Figure 7. Coping

Choosing a guardian for the children is a very specific decision that seemed to result from a complex decision-making process and was only a part of a bigger plan. Yet, participants mostly failed to explain other measures they had taken concerning family separation planning. Therefore, I used the unstructured decision theory (Mintzberg et al., 1976) to understand their decision-making process. Unstructured decision-making theory is used when the decision-maker deals with a complex situation when anticipating the outcome is difficult. Here, too, the parents live in constant worry and fear of deportation and thus separating from their children. In addition to their legal vulnerability, they mostly have low educational levels, no job or low-paying jobs, and language and cultural

barriers. Based on what participants shared, they became aware of the guardianship option through friends, neighbors, families, church, organization outreach, or they were informed about it on TV (see Figure 8). Some of them who experienced family separation were actively searching for an option, but most had not thought about it until they heard about it through one of the abovementioned channels.

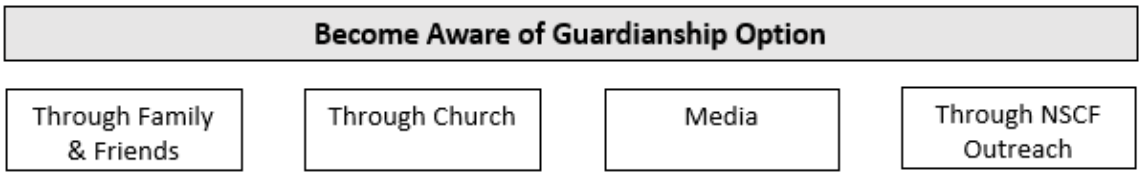

Figure 8. Become Aware of Guardianship Option

Once the participants became aware of the option, they started evaluating it. For most participants, reaching the decision to assign a guardian took place long after they became aware of such an option. Therefore, it can be concluded that the parents screened their different options (i.e., do nothing vs. assign a guardian) and then evaluated the prospective guardian. The participants all said that they trusted Ms. Sandigo as the person who could and would care for their children "if something happened to them." But, how and why do they trust Ms. Nora Sandigo? There are a few explanations (Figure 9). One of the main reasons is the community's trust and that people they trust, like friends and families, vetted her. Another reason is that many families were already receiving different types of assistance from the organization (such as food assistance). People also knew Ms. Sandigo as a resourceful person with many connections who can help them navigate immigration, health care, or education systems.

Another point many participants talked about was previous guardianship cases. They witnessed Ms. Sandigo taking care of several children who had been separated from

their parents or the children who were reunified with their parents with Ms. Sandigo's help. However, another important reason was that most families did not have any alternative option to provide the same level of care as Ms. Sandigo.

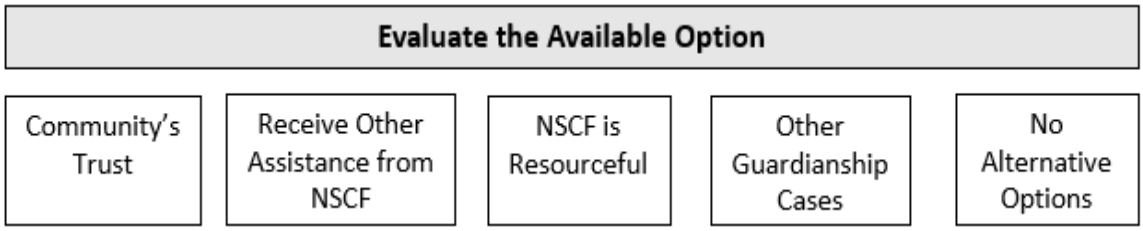

Figure 9. Evaluate the Available Option

Once they formed trust, they decided to sign the guardianship documents and make it official. Or, as Mintzberg and colleagues (1976) call it, they authorized the decision. Further questions were asked during the interview to understand better their arrangements with the guardian, the paperwork process, and their perceptions of the guardian's role (Figure 10).

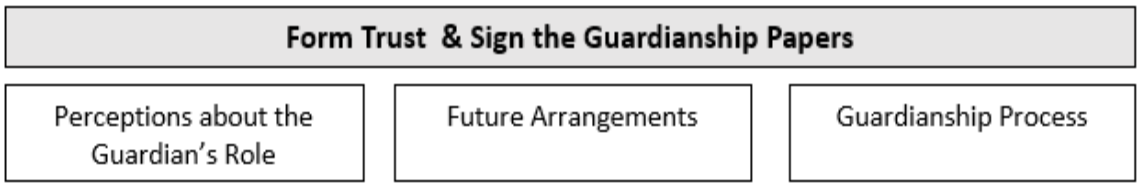

Figure 10. Form Trust & Sign the Guardianship Papers

It seemed that many parents did not have a clear understanding of the role of the guardian, and they mostly thought the guardian would replace them if they got separated from their children. While some spoke about their arrangements with Ms. Sandigo (to send the children to them or make sure they get reunited), most participants could not articulate what they wanted from the guardian. They mostly said they were briefed about guardianship during the paperwork process. Both Ms. Sandigo and her staff said that they

would explain the legal document line by line and would answer families' questions, if any.

Parents' decision-making process somewhat follows the three main phases of the unstructured decision-making theory: identification, development, and selection. However, there are some differences in the routines at the development stage. At the identification stage, parents who have experienced cumulative disadvantage and have been exposed to stressors for a long time live with the constant fear of deportation and family separation. They have recognized this for a long time amid the deportation of many people in the community, outspoken, aggressive politicians, and family separation for some. However, they became aware of the availability of an option in the community through different channels. Therefore, it can be said that most of them did not develop a solution. Instead, when they came across a ready-to-use solution in the community, they screened and evaluated it. Finally, after concluding that this was in the best interest of their children, they authorized it.

In unstructured decision-making theory, when the decision-maker deals with unfamiliar and complex situations, they try to factor the situations into structural and familiar elements by using problem-solving shortcuts. Instead of looking too far ahead, the decision-maker tries to reduce a complex environment to a series of simplified models (Mintzberg et al., 1976). In this case, too, parents deal with an overly complex and unpredictable situation. Many factors are outside of their control, and they do not have the resources and capacities (e.g., financial, educational, and social) to plan a solution and execute it. The parents do not think about the guardianship process as a highly complex decision process. For them, the important matter was to evaluate Ms.

Sandigo as a trustworthy person. Therefore, they do not plan very far ahead. They mostly took their time to vet Ms. Sandigo, but this is as far as they got. Once they formed trust, they did not think about the practical matters.

One factor that seemed very important in parents' decision-making and trust formation in Ms. Sandigo was that other families in a similar situation had done that. Previous experimental studies on decision-making show that the choices of others in society impact individual decisions (Bruch & Feinberg, 2017; Chung et al., 2015; Mann, 2018). Chung et al. (2015) found that participants were more likely to make a choice if they had observed that others had previously made the same choice. This was especially stronger when the choices of others aligned with the participant's own preferences. Mann (2018) also found that individual decisions varied depending on how many others had previously chosen different options. In the case of undocumented parents, they see that other people have already made that choice, and there are various examples of successful reunifications. The prospective guardian, Ms. Sandigo, is well trusted by the community and the church. Therefore, deciding to delegate her the guardianship of children seems logical, especially in the absence of other viable options. According to Ms. Sandigo, the number of requests for guardianship particularly increases when there is overwhelming news on immigration enforcement and ICE raids in the community or on proposed immigration policies of different presidential candidates. This was also confirmed in personal communication with North Suburban Legal Aid Clinic in Chicago (June 2021). Therefore, such external factors can also impact the parent's decision.

Once the parents have decided and assigned a legal guardian for their children, how do they communicate that to their children? To do that, they probably need to talk

about their immigration status and legal vulnerability. So these are two other main research questions in this study:

RQ2. What strategies do the parents use to communicate to the children about their own undocumented status?

RQ3. What strategies do the parents use to communicate to the children their decision to delegate guardianship of them?

Children's knowledge of their parents' immigration status and consequently their guardianship decision depended on children's age, their experience of immigration enforcement, and their immigration status. While younger children usually did not know about these matters, older children mostly knew something. Also, those children who experienced deportation of a parent or were separated from their families and those who were themselves undocumented knew about the concept of being undocumented. However, the extent of their knowledge seemed to be different. Unfortunately, the parents were not very clear on how much their children knew.

For the parents whose children did not know about their immigration status or guardianship, the reasons for not communicating with the children were children's inability to comprehend and silence to protect them. Many parents had not started the conversation merely because their children were too small to understand these concepts and their implications. In addition, some parents said they did not want to worry the children by talking about these issues. They wanted to protect their children emotionally and not overwhelm them with information that could create fear. Balderas et al. (2016) found similar results in a focus group of 12 undocumented parents who discussed parent-child conversations about legal status. Some of those parents also stated that they did not

talk to their children to protect them from unnecessary distress and fear. Balderas and colleagues did not explore further. But, in the current study, parents were asked about communication plans, when and how they would talk about these issues. They mostly did not have a plan and said they would speak to the children once they felt the children were ready to understand. Some said they planned to talk about this issue gradually and slowly prepare the children for the future.

Participants who said their children knew about their legal status and guardianship were further asked to elaborate on what prompted such conversation. Some said that experience of immigration enforcement, deportation of a family member, or family separation exposed the children to reality, and they had to talk with them. Some others said that it was their choice to speak with the children. They said they wanted the children to hear it from them and be prepared for possible separation or leaving the US. Several parents also said they had to talk with their children because they had started asking questions. These results partially align with the findings of previous studies (Balderas et al., 2016; Lykes et al., 2013; Rendón García, 2019). They reported that either external circumstances or children's questions prompted the conversation. However, while parents in the current study mentioned that they voluntarily chose to talk about legal status and guardianship, participants in the study of Balderas et al. (2016) and Rendón García (2019) did not point that out.

When asked about the content of the conversation about legal status, participants said they had talked about limitations in travel, future plans, and children's fears and worries. They also said that they tried to decriminalize being undocumented when responding to children's questions. They were worried that the children would think that

being undocumented equals being a criminal, so they tried to explain the difference. The notion of negotiating “illegality” and “criminality’ in a mixed-status family has been previously discussed by a few scholars (Abrego, 2016; Dreby, 2012). Dreby (2012), who interviewed children and their immigrant families in Ohio and New Jersey, found that children equated immigration and illegality. Abrego (2016), who interviewed Latinx youth in California, also found that conversations about legal status had been challenging between parents and children as "illegality" was a source of tension. However, neither of them discussed parents' efforts to address that. In the current study, parents said they tried to distinguish being undocumented and being a criminal. They explained to their children the arduous journey they had to take to reach the US to give their children a chance of being citizens of a developed country like the US.

As for the conversation about guardianship, most participants did not provide many details on how they conversed with their children. They mainly introduced the guardian as a trusted person to whom the children could go if anything happened to the parents. This strategy seems closely related to their perceptions of the guardian's role and how they decided to assign a guardian for their children. In responding to the first research question, it was theorized that parents had simplified guardianship, which is a complex issue, to structural elements that they can analyze and understand. For them, guardianship was a matter of trusting the prospective guardian. Once they concluded that the prospective guardian was trustworthy, they signed the guardianship documents. They took the same rationale in communicating their decision to their children: by introducing the guardian as the trusted person. Only two participants provided details on the children's questions about their decision. In both cases, the children were unsure about

their parents' decision and had doubts. Both participants said that they responded by assuring the children that the guardian is a trusted person and would provide care for them if anything happened to them. The issue of family separation planning and communicating that with children has not received much scholarly attention. In one study (Lykes et al., 2013), 50 undocumented parents were asked if they had a plan and if they had shared that with their children. 58% reported having a plan, but only 20% of those who had a plan had discussed that plan with their children. How parents communicated their decisions, however, was not further explored.

Implications

This study increases knowledge about the issues that citizen children and their undocumented parents face and how they try to cope with those issues. It also demonstrates how immigration enforcement policies and practices affect the lives of US citizen children. Previous studies have examined the most apparent impacts on children's health and mental health. Still, less attention had been given to other complex issues that the families have to deal with, including determining guardians for their children. This study has implications for research, policy, and practice.

Implications for research

Although immigration advocates (e.g., Chicago Volunteer Legal Services, 2017, National Immigrant Justice Center, 2017, and Immigrant Defense Project, 2019) recommend undocumented immigrants assign a guardian for their children, there are a high number of children at risk of living in households without their parents' presence (Amuedo-Dorantes & Arenas-Arroyo, 2019), the issue of child guardianship among undocumented immigrants has not received much scholarly attention. In the absence of a

prior similar study on factors associated with determining child guardianship among undocumented parents, this study brings scholarly attention to this issue and offers important information on factors underlying such a decision. It further examines how undocumented immigrant populations use their own resources to cope with and prepare for possible immigration crises that might impact the well-being of their children. This study paves the ground for future research on how the voluntary transfer of guardianship or joint guardianship impacts children's healthy growth and development. Parents make such decisions with the hope of serving the best interest of their children. Further research is needed to examine the implications of such decisions for parents and children in the long term.

This dissertation builds on previous studies on parent-child communication on immigration status (Balderas et al., 2016; Berger Cardoso et al., 2018; Lykes et al., 2013; Rendón García, 2019). The parent-child conversation is vital in helping children better know their thoughts and emotions, especially about their bicultural identity. It might even serve as a protective factor against possible racial and ethnic discrimination (Balderas et al., 2016). Most studies, including the current dissertation, have focused on parents' strategies and practices in communicating their legal status with their children. Future studies should include children's voices and feelings about such conversation. Also, further research should study the long-term impacts of parental choices (i.e., to communicate their status or to keep silent) and their strategies on the children's development.

Implications for practice

This study informs future social work practice by identifying common strategies used by undocumented immigrants to minimize the impacts of immigration enforcement policies and practices on their citizen children. As the number of undocumented immigrant parents assigning a guardian for their children increases (personal communications, North Suburban Legal Aid Clinic in Chicago, June 2021; Nora Sandigo, August 2021), service providers should understand how the families may have to determine a guardian for their children and how having third-person involvement at that level can impact the children. They need to be aware of the complex dynamics that transferring child custody might create to be able to provide appropriate support to the children and their families. Schools are one example of service agencies that could benefit from the knowledge of these children's specific needs; in this case, to provide better educational services or contact the guardian in case of an immigration emergency. Besides, schools, practitioners and agencies can help the parents make informed decisions and educate them on healthy communication techniques once they want to communicate their decisions with their children.

The findings of this study suggest that living in constant fear of separation and permanently losing children to the child welfare system create profound stress, which leads parents to assign a guardian for their children. Therefore, immigrant-serving providers are encouraged to educate undocumented parents about their rights and their children's rights. There is also a need for programs targeting parents and children's stress of future separation. Such programs should focus on mitigating uncertainty and working with the families to manage the stress of themselves and their children. The National

Child Traumatic Stress Network suggests that service providers regularly screen children for exposure to trauma, provide evidence-based, culturally responsive assessment and treatments, focus on protective factors that support resilience in families affected by trauma, establish continuity of care, and address the traumatic experiences of the parents (Bartlett & Ramos-Olazagasti, 2018).

Guardianship appointment is a way for the mixed-status family to control their children's future without involving a public child welfare agency. This is an organic solution initiated by the community; the child advocates need to understand the reasoning and the process and plan for facilitating it. As a preventive measure, the child welfare system and child advocates can invest in partnering with immigrant-serving organizations to educate the families on assigning a trusted legal guardian for their children. They can work to ensure that families are aware of different types of guardianship and available alternatives and that the "best interest of the child" is considered. This can be done via a partnership with community organizations, such as NSCF, that are trusted by and have access to these families. Child advocates should also provide training for grassroots community organizations that serve children and families to raise their awareness about children's safety and wellbeing.

While the focus of the current study was US citizen children, in many mixed status families, including in the present sample, siblings might be of different immigration statuses. In other words, those children who immigrated to the US with their families are undocumented, and the ones born here are citizens. Future research needs to focus on differences between the two groups concerning family separation planning and

guardianship appointment. Also, how parents communicate and explain the differences in immigration status to the children could be the focus of future studies.

Implications for Policy

The potential findings of the proposed study could inform policy at broader system levels, such as the immigration and child welfare systems. Knowing about the strategies that undocumented parents have and the measures they take, especially with the help of their resources and networks, would potentially be beneficial for planning and implementing evidence-based programs. Child welfare systems have been called to increase the involvement of community members in identifying and developing services (Dettlaff & Rycraft, 2010). For example, the state child welfare system can partner with immigrant-serving organizations to recruit relative caregivers, remove systemic barriers preventing immigrant relatives from becoming legal caregivers, and promote kinship foster family resources. They can also reallocate resources to promote such community-driven initiatives and thus decrease the foster care caseload.

As discussed in the findings, families view the legal guardian, in this case, Ms. Sandigo, as someone who temporarily provides care for their children and ensures the family gets reunited. One of the reasons they trust her is several reunification cases facilitated by Ms. Sandigo. The families do not trust governmental agencies because they fear they will permanently lose their children. Such fear is not superficial. Previous studies on child welfare policies across different states show that child welfare agencies might not have adequate policies in place for reuniting children with their deported parents (Greenberg et al., 2019; Wessler, 2013). For example, in order to release a child to a parent or caregiver in a foreign country, a foreign consulate in the US and a foreign

child welfare agency should be involved. A memorandum of understanding or an agreement should be in place for such collaborations. State policies should be modified to include provisions for family reunifications. Greenberg et al. (2019) recommend that state child welfare agencies initiate formal partnerships with consulates with substantial service populations to facilitate the reunification of the children with their deported parents. To ensure family reunification is a priority goal, Smith et al. (2020) recommended a proactive action plan for child welfare agencies to reunify families that have been separated solely because of immigration policies. The action steps include the following: safeguarding the right of parental control through MoUs with the ICE and creating internal protocols, expediting family reunification through completing a task force working on policies that need to be changed, facilitating timely communication between parents and children by providing training for the related staff, and promoting cultural competency among the staff.

The immigration system should also consider the unique needs of parents of US citizen children. Keeping families together should be a priority because family separation can harm children's health and wellbeing. While an immigration policy change at the federal level seems far-fetched, small-scale provisions could be made to ensure that children's "best interest" is considered before a parent is detained or deported. For example, nonprofit community organizations such as Nora Sandigo Children Foundation could assist with services for children who face parental detention or deportation. Such organizations might also help assist with the supervised release of a parent when possible. Involvement of nongovernmental organizations was also recommended by Chaudry et al. (2010) as short-term methods focused on children's best interests. They also suggested

the availability of deportation defense lawyers, favoring supervised release of a parent over detention, ensuring access of children to undocumented parents during detention, and providing safe havens or school programs to assist children directly after parental arrest.

Many children cross the border unaccompanied to join their families in the US. Until released to their parents or other sponsors, unaccompanied children are in the custody of the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) within the US Department of Health and Human Services and placed in ORR-funded shelters. ORR is in charge of finding their parents, guardians, or relatives, if known, and finding a suitable sponsor, if unknown (Administration for Children and Families Press Office, 2021). While children are in the care of ORR, the parent, relative, or potential sponsor should go through a screening process, which includes a criminal background check, child abuse or neglect case, and interview (Greenberg et al., 2021). Even though there is no citizenship or financial requirement, undocumented parents might feel intimidated and fear navigating the system. ORR can partner with trusted community organizations and involve them in identifying the parents and relatives and get their help in facilitating the reunification processes. In addition, these organizations can liaise with the families, brief them about the ORR procedures, and help them understand the process.

Limitations

Although this dissertation provides salient information about how undocumented immigrant parents prepare for possible future family separation to the discourse on undocumented families and their children, it should be considered in the context of certain limitations. First, participants were unique, drawn from a convenience sample in

south Miami. Recruiting participants via only one community source can result in a self-selection process and impact the generalizability of the findings. Undocumented populations are not easy to access; it was only through a relationship with Nora Sandigo Children Foundation and the voluntary community service that I was able to contact families for the study. Second, the participants included in this study all assigned Ms. Sandigo as the guardian of their children. Thus this study is limited by excluding the people who might have decided otherwise. Third, this research was conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic, which posed a significant challenge in data collection. The in-person data collection was not possible because of Covid-19 restrictions. Many potential participants did not have access to reliable means of virtual communication or did not have digital literacy. This challenge negatively impacted the participation of many individuals who otherwise were interested in the study. Fourth, to protect the confidentiality of the participants, especially concerning their legal vulnerability, and minimize the risk of identification, no follow-up interviews were conducted. Ideally, follow-up interviews would have permitted greater insight into the participants' decision-making process and permitted member checks. Therefore, each interview was coded before conducting a new one so that any clarification could be undertaken during interviews with other participants. Moreover, the initial findings were shared with NSCF staff and volunteers in a debriefing session, and their feedback was sought. Fifth, because the interviews were facilitated through NSCF, the participants might have given responses that they thought were expected.

Sixth, my lack of Spanish proficiency prevented me from conducting the interviews myself. This was a major impediment in asking clarifying and follow-up

questions which could be essential in understanding parents' logical decision-making process. Instead, I had to rely on the interviewer. I tried to tackle this problem by holding debriefing sessions with the interviewer and discussing what questions I would have asked. This proved helpful, so the later interviews contained more detailed information. Also, I decided to recruit more participants (7) to have sufficient data for analysis. On the other hand, this limitation could also be viewed positively as it decreased the researcher's bias, especially in posing questions that could direct participants' responses and interfere with their objectivity (Frey, 2018). Finally, I solely coded the transcripts because recruiting another coder was beyond the time and cost limit of the project. To tackle this limitation and minimize the bias, I constantly communicated with my major professor during the coding process and sought her advice on initial and advanced codes.

Despite these limitations, this study has strengths. The richness of the data collected from these women may help inform future research and practice for scholars studying family separation planning among undocumented immigrants. One of the reasons that data collection was possible amid sensitivity of the topic, difficulties of recruiting undocumented immigrants, and the Covid-19 challenge was NSCF's reputation in the community. It was evident that the participants' unconditional trust in Ms. Sandigo was an integral factor in their willingness to participate in this study. In addition, even though talking about possible family separation was difficult, many of the participants stated they wanted to be a part of this study because they felt that their stories might be heard.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1- Interview Protocol

Introduction

You are being asked to participate in a research study examining the experience of assigning guardians for children among undocumented parents. I understand that this is a sensitive topic, and I appreciate your willingness to share your thoughts with me.

Everything you share with me will be confidential. This means I cannot share any information that identifies you, including your name, your children's names, or any other names and addresses you may provide, with anyone. After this interview, I will not keep any information that links you to this interview.

This interview will be recorded so that I can go back and listen to your thoughts. After the interview will be transcribed. This means that everything on the recording will be written out. Once it is written, the recording will be destroyed. Does this make sense? Is it okay to begin?

For this interview, I would like you to think about your life and your experiences. Do you have any questions at this point?

Topic 1: Undocumented experience

Why did you decide to come to the U.S.?

- Suggestions: family, money, a new life, security….

What is it like to live here without papers?

- What does this mean to you?
- How does it impact your everyday life?

Suggestions: taking different routes when you drive, changing school routines, prohibiting your children from attending field trips, not travelling…

- What is it the most difficult thing about being undocumented?
- Imagine you had papers; how do you think life would be different?

Topic 2: Determining guardianship

You have chosen to register with Nora and give your children's guardianship to Nora; tell me about that decision.

- How did you decide to delegate guardianship of your children to Nora?
- What were the alternatives (Family members, close relatives)? Do you have any other person who could do that for you?
- Why did you not give them guardianship?
- What was the procedure like?
- On a scale of 1 to 10 how well did you understand the paperwork?
- Tell me about other measures you have taken to protect your children from possible harm? What else did you do?
    - Suggestions: Talking to school, financial decisions, …
- Apart from choosing a guardian, what else have you done/planned for future? Have you made any plans for your children future living arrangements?
    - Suggestion: With whom your children are going to live? Where? Have you discussed it with Nora?

Topic 3: Communication with children

Tell me about your children…

- What do your children know about your (and/or your partner's) immigration status? Do the children know that you do not have a legal document?
    - **If yes,** how did they find out? (Did you tell them or did they find out from other sources (e.g., media, friends, schools…)
    - **If no,** why? When do you think you want to talk with them?
- If yes, did you talk to your children about delegating guardianship to other people?
    - **If yes,** what was the talk like?
    - **If no,** why have you not talked to them? Is there any reason?
    - Have you talked to them about the possibility of living with others when you are not around?

Topic 4: Dreams and aspirations

What is your biggest dream/wish?

What is it in the world that you want to see most?

Is there anything more you want to talk about, or do you have any questions for me?

Thank you for participating in this interview. Your answers are very helpful for my study. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions or concerns.

Appendix 2- Verbal Consent Form

ADULT VERBAL CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

Assigning A Guardian: Family Separation Planning Among Undocumented Immigrants With US Citizen Children

SUMMARY INFORMATION

Things you should know about this study:

- **Purpose:** The purpose of the study is to understand the experience of undocumented parents in assigning guardians for their US citizen children.
- **Procedures**: If you choose to participate, you will be asked to attend a 45 to 60-minute interview in a private room. The interview will be audio recorded to help the researcher to listen later and understand your thoughts.
- **Duration:** This will take about 45 to 60 minutes.
- **Risks**: The main risk or discomfort from this research is you might feel stressed while talking about your immigration status and the decision you made to assign a guardian for your children.
- **Benefits:** There is no direct benefit to you from this research. However, the results of this study can help researchers to know about the issues undocumented parents with citizen children, such as yourself, are dealing with.
- **Alternatives:** There are no known alternatives available to you other than not taking part in this study.
- **Participation:** Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please carefully read the entire document before agreeing to participate.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the study is to understand the experience of undocumented parents in assigning guardians for their US citizen children.

NUMBER OF STUDY PARTICIPANTS

If you decide to be in this study, you will be one of 20 people in this research study.

DURATION OF THE STUDY

Your participation will take 45 to 60 minutes of your time. If you agree to be in the study, I will ask you to do the following things:

1- Participate in a 45 to 60-minute semi-structured interview in a private room. The interview will be audio recorded.

RISKS AND/OR DISCOMFORTS

The study has the following possible risks to you: you may feel psychological discomfort when talking about the risk of future separation from your children and the decision you made to give the guardianship of your children to another person.

BENEFITS

The study has the following possible benefits to you:

Findings will generate knowledge regarding the issues undocumented parents with citizen children, such as yourself, are dealing with. The result of this study will help the immigrant rights advocates as well as service providers to better promote these coping strategies among immigrant populations.

ALTERNATIVES

There are no known alternatives available to you other than not taking part in this study.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Everything you share with me will be confidential. This means I cannot share any information that identifies you, including your name, your children's names, or any other names and addresses you may provide, with anyone. After this interview, I will not keep any information that links you to this interview. However, your records may be inspected by authorized University or other agents who will also keep the information confidential.

USE OF YOUR INFORMATION

- Identifiers about you might be removed from the identifiable private information, and, after such removal, the information could be used for future research studies or distributed to another investigator for future research studies without additional informed consent from you or your legally authorized representative.

COMPENSATION & COSTS

You will receive a payment of a $20 gift card for your participation. \

RIGHT TO DECLINE OR WITHDRAW

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You are free to participate in the study or withdraw your consent at any time during the study. You will not lose any benefits if you decide not to participate or if you quit the study early. The investigator reserves the right to remove you without your consent at such a time that she feels it is in the best interest.

RESEARCHER CONTACT INFORMATION

If you have any questions about the purpose, procedures, or any other issues relating to this research study, you may contact Dr. Miriam Potocky at FIU MMC AHC5 568, 305-348-6324 potockym@fiu.edu.

IRB CONTACT INFORMATION

If you would like to talk with someone about your rights of being a subject in this research study or about ethical issues with this research study, you may contact the FIU Office of Research Integrity by phone at 305-348-2494 or by email at ori@fiu.edu.

Do you provide your consent to participate in this research project?

VITA

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2006- 2008	MA in Social Science Research Islamic Azad University Tehran, Iran
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