

## The invisibility of undocumented migrants in 9/11 relief and commemoration is a symptom of their wider social and political isolation.

*Despite their lack of recognition, undocumented immigrants are not immune from the disasters and tragedies that occur in the U.S. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2011 were no exception. **Alexandra Délano** and **Benjamin Nienass** look at how, in the wake of 9/11, the undocumented immigrants that were involved in the tragedy and their families were practically 'invisible' to state and non-state institutions who would have otherwise provided assistance and recognition. They argue that this failure of public life for undocumented immigrants is down to their own fears about coming forward due to their legal status, procedural requirements which called for documents that they did not possess, and the post 9/11 associations between immigration, security and terrorism.*



At the inauguration of the *National September 11 Memorial* on September 11, 2011, the families of 2,753 officially recognized victims were invited to attend the site of the attacks while each name was read out loud. Among the names were those of five Mexicans who worked in two of the restaurants in the building, *Windows on the World* and *Fine and Schapiro*. At first glance, this appeared to be a low number of victims from Mexico given the estimated near 187,000 that lived in the city in 2000 according to the US Census (other estimates that tried to account for undercounted populations ranged from 275,000 to 300,000).

Shortly after the 10-year anniversary ceremony at the National Memorial ended, the Mexican Consulate in New York held its own ceremony, including not only the families of the 5 victims who had been invited to the site, but also the families of 10 other victims whose names are not included in the 9/11 memorial, as well as Mexican first responders and their families. In front of a damaged Mexican flag that was found among the remains and donated to the Mexican Consulate in New York years after the attacks, the names of 15 Mexicans that were reported missing after 9/11 were read out loud while the Consul General expressed that the ceremony was also honoring the memory of many other, unknown, Mexican victims.

Based on an examination of the dialogues between city authorities, consulate authorities, community organizations, philanthropic institutions, victims' families and witnesses, as well as interviews with government officials, medical examiners, survivors, and community organizations, we aimed at a better understanding of the inability of state and non-state institutions to effectively deal with the invisibility of undocumented migrants in terms of providing assistance and recognition at a moment of tragedy. Such an understanding is vital: On the individual and family level, this deprivation precludes access to essential relief services; in larger political terms this lack of visibility speaks to a specific framing that does not allow for certain lives and deaths to become publicly acknowledged. This framing is not always necessarily engrained in the consciousness of public officials and bureaucrats responsible for denying the claims of the families of the undocumented, but is often embedded in procedural requirements, logics of evidence, and perceptions of trust that reproduce the invisibility of these victims.

Our [research](#), shows that from the perspective of the undocumented migrant, it was a breakdown of private as well as public life that explains their omission both from public memory and vital relief services. We argue that there are three major reasons for this failure: 1) A general fear of coming forward on the part of undocumented migrants or their families partly as a result of their legal status and their lack of trust in government agencies, which was compounded by ineffective communication on the part of government agencies at the moment of informing about and delivering relief services; 2) different procedural requirements and logics of evidence used by government and non-governmental relief agencies, which, in some cases, made it impossible for undocumented migrants or their

families to provide proof of their presence at the site or employment in the businesses affected near the World Trade Center; 3) and finally, the context of 9/11 as a disruptive event that influenced the overall climate in which issues of victimhood and immigration status could be publically addressed. The association between immigration, security, and terrorism was significantly reinforced after 9/11 and the reactions triggered by this climate were particularly felt by the groups that were providing assistance or dealing with immigrants' claims.



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The case of the possibly unacknowledged victims of 9/11 reveals the difficulties of undocumented migrants to 'switch' effortlessly into a public existence even in a moment of collective tragedy, and even when agencies had openly suspended some of their restrictions on undocumented immigrants in the wake of the attacks.

Other recent tragedies such as Hurricane Katrina in 2005 or Hurricane Sandy in 2012 expose similar issues in terms of intended or unintended exclusion from relief services. However, this particular case, where the number and the names of the victims are the subject of public commemoration efforts that for many are at the core of what it means to be 'American', presents additional questions of who is considered part of the political community and who is not. In the case of 9/11, this also means that the absence of some of the undocumented migrants who fell victim to the attacks is 'confirmed' in the material reality created by the memorial and consequently gains a strong symbolic significance.

Finally, beyond questions of dignity and recognition, we also need to reflect on the deeper logic displayed by a politics that becomes aware of invisibility only at the moment where survival, biological existence, and disaster relief are at stake. Not only is such a logic to be interrogated in functional terms – for example for its faulty assumption that the undocumented can easily switch into a mode of social and political existence recognized by the state at the moment of large scale disaster – but also in terms of its implications for active citizenship. The case of relief and commemorative efforts in the wake of 9/11 is also an instance where even a narrow view of inclusion lays bare the isolation in social and political terms that undocumented migrants face *beyond* moments of large-scale disasters in their everyday existence.

*This article is based on the paper ['Invisible Victims: Undocumented Migrants and the Aftermath of September 11'](#) in *Politics & Society*.*

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USApp– American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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## About the authors

### **Alexandra Délano** – *The New School*

Alexandra Délano is Assistant Professor of Global Studies at the New School. She received her doctorate from the University of Oxford in International Relations. Her publications include *Mexico and Its Diaspora in the United States: Policies of Emigration since 1848* (Cambridge University Press, 2011) and articles in *Political Geography*, *Politics and Society*, *International Migration Review*, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, and *Social Research*.



### **Benjamin Nienass** – *California State University, San Marcos*

Benjamin Nienassis Assistant Professor of Political Science at California State University San Marcos. He received his doctorate in Politics from The New School for Social Research in New York. His articles have appeared in *The Review of Politics*, *Politics and Society*, *Globalizations*, the *International Social Science Journal* and the *International Journal for Politics, Culture, and Society*. He is also the coeditor of *Silence, Screen, and Spectacle: Rethinking Social Memory in the Age of Information* (Berghahn Books, 2014; with Lindsey Freeman and Rachel Daniell).



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