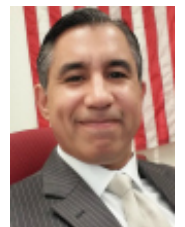


Undocumented and unaccompanied Latino youth who are exposed to violence are more likely to turn to crime to overcome disadvantage.

Recent years have seen growing concern over the increasing number of unaccompanied youth arriving at the US-Mexico border. But despite this concern, such undocumented youth have been an understudied group. In new research, [Marika Dawkins](#) and [Frank A. Rodriguez](#) interviewed undocumented and unaccompanied Latino youth living at the US-Mexico border. They find that members of this group who experience pervasive violence may be more likely to commit crimes in order to overcome personal hardships.



While the United States has often been touted as a “melting-pot” nation, this public rhetoric belies the xenophobic attitudes held by many toward certain immigrant groups, especially Latinos. Among the Latino population, however, are undocumented and unaccompanied minors who have been crossing the US-Mexico (Rio Grande Valley of South Texas) border into the mainland. Many of these minors are fleeing from their home countries (mainly from Central America and Mexico) in an attempt to reunite with family already in the US, escape wars, poverty, and in search of better life opportunities. Other undocumented minors are also [smuggled](#) into the country for exploitation – labor and/or sexual. In a new survey of these undocumented and unaccompanied youth, we find that those who are exposed to violence and other challenges are more likely to take up crime.



Each year thousands of children, both accompanied and unaccompanied, are apprehended while attempting to cross the US border. In 2013, reports suggested more than a hundred children were crossing the Texas border each day. More recently, a Texas report confirmed that there had been an increase in the number of undocumented and unaccompanied children crossing the US-Mexico border, which forced the state’s Governor, Gregg Abbott, to [ask](#) the federal government for additional resources to protect the state and its borders. According to the the same report, over 4500 unaccompanied children were apprehended in August 2015, an increase of 400 from July and 800 from June during the same year. These increases have caused concerns given that the number of border crossings has historically tended to be lower during these months. These developments have only heightened the fears of Americans that more children may attempt to cross the border. Unsurprisingly, both policymakers and citizens have blamed the passing of the Development, relief, and Education for Alien Minors, or DREAM Act, for recent increases in the immigrant youth population. The “[dream act](#)” is a federal law devised to offer immigration relief to students and thereafter remove some legal and economic barriers.

And, despite some improvements by advocates of immigration law, undocumented immigrants face numerous challenges living in a country where their rights are sometimes limited and they are more vulnerable to exploitation. [Previous work](#) has noted that the legacy of immigration is frequently characterized by discrimination, struggle, and violence. These challenges are even more evident for non-European Americans, who are often blamed for the country’s alleged breakdown in stability, morality, and unity. For example, Mexicans are seen by some as criminals and outcasts, a rhetoric recently repeated by the presumptive Republican presidential nominee, Donald Trump, who referred to Mexicans as criminals and rapists in his first major speech. The potential for exploitation and difficulties associated with integrating into the American society seem to have done very little to deter undocumented and unaccompanied youth from coming to the US, however.

The link between immigration and crime remains unclear. Earlier studies seemed to [suggest](#) low crime rates among

immigrants while more recent evidence indicates more criminal involvement. Similarly, the debate surrounding the contribution of immigrants to the US economy is far from settled based on conflicting findings. For example, In 2011, the American Immigration Council claimed that there was no association between unemployment and immigration, while Harvard's George Borjas [concluded](#) that much of the benefits of immigrants to the US economy do not extend to the native population.



Border Wall Mural in Nogales, Mexico. Credit: Jonathan McIntosh (Flickr, CC-BY-NC-SA-2.0)

Despite these issues and concerns, however, undocumented and unaccompanied Latino youth remain an understudied population. To explore the challenges and experiences of undocumented and unaccompanied youth, we employed a snowball technique to conduct interviews with undocumented and unaccompanied youth living on or near the US-Mexico border.

Overall, some of our interview results confirm previous studies' findings that examine the reasons and justifications for immigrating unaccompanied and undocumented to the US. Some of these reasons include attempts to escape poverty, famine, war, or abuse; while some seek family reunification and others were brought into the country for exploitation. In our study, the evidence suggests that undocumented and unaccompanied Latino youth are more prone to victimization rather than being perpetrators of crime. However, Latino youth who are exposed to pervasive violence and other challenges are unlikely to recognize their full potential or succeed. Instead, they are more susceptible to personal failures in many different areas which may force them to turn to a life of crime.

As such, protecting youth must be of a major priority. And while there has been progress in recent years, such as reducing the use and length of detention, improvements in transfer conditions of minors and awareness of trafficking, additional improvements are needed. Therefore, we hope policymakers and practitioners will continue to focus on best practices and advance the interest of unaccompanied and undocumented minors in the US. It is worth noting that, almost all Americans have been linked to immigration; some are descendants of immigrants or immigrants themselves. But the nation's political climate and ongoing immigration debate suggest that many Americans have forgotten their own roots and the positive contribution of immigrants.

*This article is based on the paper [“Undocumented Latino Youth: Migration Experiences and the Challenges of Integrating into American Society”](#) in the *Journal of International Migration and Integration*.*

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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

Marika Dawkins – *University of Texas Rio Grande Valley*

Marika Dawkins is an assistant professor of criminal justice at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. She has published on both criminal and juvenile justice-related issues. Her research interests include juveniles, delinquency prevention, immigration, the US-Mexico border, and the decriminalization of illicit drugs.



Frank A. Rodriguez – *North Carolina Central University*

Frank A. Rodriguez is an assistant professor of criminal justice at North Carolina Central University. He has published on a number of issues including immigration, contemporary policing and law enforcement. His research interests include juvenile justice, immigration, race & ethnicity, immigration, and terrorism.



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