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Contact Isn't Enough: Attitudes towards and Misunderstandings about Undocumented Immigrants among a Diverse College Population

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ABSTRACT

Ample evidence exists of bipartisan positive attitudes towards undocumented immigrants receiving a path to citizenship, and of a lack of US residents' knowledge about undocumented immigration, but it is not yet clear whether individuals in the same sampling frame may exhibit both favourable attitudes towards and ignorance about undocumented immigrants. We use open- and closed-ended survey questions (N = 231) to probe perceptions of immigrants and knowledge about US immigration procedures in a cohort of demographically and ideologically diverse college students. Our findings confirmed largely favourable attitudes towards undocumented immigrants, but also misconceptions about undocumented immigrants' rights and options with respect to citizenship. That this lack of understanding exists even in a diverse population with direct contact with undocumented immigrants suggests that such ignorance is pervasive, and not only likely to occur in areas where few undocumented immigrants live or where a conservative political climate creates a culture of exclusion.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 01 AUGUST 2018; Accepted 16 MAY 2019

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KEYWORDS

undocumented immigration; knowledge; ignorance; survey experiments; public perceptions; attitudes

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Introduction

Almost 11 million immigrants without legal status currently live in the United States (Pew Research Center 2018a). According to federal law, undocumented immigrants cannot vote or hold public office (see 18 U.S.C. § 611). Without a Green Card, work permit, or employment-related visa, they are restricted from working legally, and while the Supreme Court ruled in 1982 that undocumented children may enroll in public school (see *Plyler v. Doe*), undocumented individuals cannot accept federal financial aid for higher education. Proposals for a Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act, which would grant many undocumented immigrants a path to citizenship, have repeatedly failed to pass at the federal level.

As the future of undocumented immigrants' ability to stay in the US depends heavily on the ambiguous future of immigration reform, immigrant rights associations have made a path to citizenship a top priority. A recent Ipsos poll (2018; $n = 1004$) conducted on behalf of National Public Radio revealed bipartisan support for the notion that immigrants are an important part "of our American identity." The same poll showed that nearly two-thirds (65%) of respondents support a path to legal status for some undocumented immigrants—81% of Democrats and 51% of Republicans believe that legal status should be available to undocumented immigrants brought

to the US as children, and 62% of participants correctly determined that undocumented immigrants are not more likely to commit crimes or be incarcerated than American-born citizens. These findings suggest broad attitudes in favour of undocumented immigrants. Still, partisan leanings remain clear in the ways the US government responds to the presence of these immigrants. For example, 77% of Republicans have a favourable view of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), the division of the US Department of Homeland Security tasked with enforcing immigration laws through the removal of unauthorized immigrants, while only 26% of Democrats have a favourable view of ICE (Pew Research Center 2018b).

To know through what means these attitudes are formed, one must take a closer look at individuals' interactions with and knowledge about undocumented immigrants. To this end, this project interrogates the roots of these attitudes using a mixed methodology of open- and closed-ended survey questions about both perceptions of undocumented immigrants and knowledge about US immigration policy and procedures. We set out to discover what influence demographics and political ideology have on a person's attitudes towards undocumented immigrants, and what kinds of misunderstanding and misinformation are present in US residents' understanding of immigration. Notably, the study intentionally probes these attitudes in a cohort of demographically and ideologically diverse college students situated at an urban university in one of the largest and most diverse cities in the US, with a particularly high concentration of undocumented immigrants both on-campus and in the city.

Attitudes towards undocumented immigrants

Public attitudes towards immigrants hold a good deal of potential to influence immigrants' everyday lives. Dorner, Crawford, Jennings, Sandoval and Hagar (2017) suggest "Public attitudes that view immigrants as community members or as 'others' can reify physical,

psychological, and/or symbolic boundaries in legislation and education” (p. 926). Individuals’ attitudes towards immigrants may result from at least three interrelated factors: their own first-hand social experiences with immigrants, the ways undocumented immigrants are portrayed in US media, and from individuals’ own political leanings and observable demographics. Each of these is discussed below.

Social contact with undocumented immigrants

In 1954, Allport advanced the (social) contact hypothesis to suggest that intergroup contact could reduce negative attitudes of a majority group towards a minority group. In simplest form, majority individuals who have contact with minority individuals are less likely to harbour negative attitudes towards minority groups. Meta-analysis of intergroup contact research by Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) reported consistent evidence that engaging in social contact with minority outgroup members reduces outgroup negative stereotyping.

Relevant to the current study, the contact hypothesis has been demonstrated in academic settings. Collier, Bos, and Sandfort (2012) showed that heterosexual adolescents in school settings were more likely to report favourable attitudes towards gay and lesbian men and women in instances where there was extracurricular contact (i.e., contact outside of the classroom setting). Focused on adults in South Africa, Dixon, Durrheim, and Tredoux (2007) tested whether attitudes about race were affected by interracial contact and, instead, found evidence of stubborn attitudes (adhering to held prejudices)—these effects were especially pronounced in White respondents (a finding discussed in the US context by Kinder [1986]). Mak, Brown, and Wadey (2013)’s work with international and domestic university students in Australia demonstrated that quality, rather than quantity, of intergroup communication was key to reducing outgroup stereotyping and thus, fostering more positive interactions. In all three cases,

facilitating meaningful interaction was critical to reducing negative attitudes towards minority outgroups.

With respect to research applying the contact hypothesis to undocumented immigrants, Hackett (2015-2016) found that individuals living in areas with a substantial population of undocumented Latino immigrants were more tolerant towards the target group. Other research has found that mere contact with undocumented immigrants had no statistically significant direct effect on attitudes of in-groups (Gravelle 2016) or can even have a negative impact (for example, if contact triggers considerations of cultural dissimilarity; Espenshade and Calhoun 1993). Still others suggested critical mediating and moderating variables: Rapp (2015) suggesting that effects vary based on the specific ethnic composition of immigrant groups, and the aforementioned Mak et al. (2013) suggesting increased communication quality and decreased intercultural anxiety to help improve domestic students' attitudes towards immigrant students.

For the current study, we broadly expect that individuals' social contact with undocumented immigrants through both their campus and urban encounters would influence how those individuals view undocumented immigrants as a group—potentially reducing negative stereotypes.

Mediated contact and portrayals

Negative metaphors and stereotypes pervade portrayals of immigrants in mainstream US media (Chavez 2001; Chavez 2013; Cisneros 2008; Merolla, Ramakrishnan, and Haynes 2013). Analyses of US media dating back to the early twentieth century reveal the widespread prevalence of descriptions of immigrants as “indigestible food, conquering hordes, and waste materials” (O'Brien 2003, 33). In analyses of more recent media, Cisneros (2008) demonstrates how US news presents undocumented immigrants metaphorically as pollutants that contaminate

the environment. Inda (2000) reveals how US media portrays immigrants without legal status “as a parasite intruding on the body of the host nation, drawing nutrients from it” (47). Notably, this negative framing extends even to undocumented children. In an analysis of reader comments following reports from *CNN*, *Fox News*, *The Guardian*, *NPR*, and *The Washington Post* about unaccompanied minors arriving from Central America, Antony and Thomas (2017) found that audiences described undocumented children as diseased economic burdens born to irresponsible parents. The ways media portray immigrants may affect immigrants’ wellbeing (Bishop 2016), and such effects are not restricted to the United States (see Leudar et al. 2008; Trebbe and Schoenhagen 2008).

Importantly for the current study, the effects of mediated portrayals of immigrants also extend to nonimmigrant audiences. Allport (1954) advanced his contact hypothesis to suggest that interpersonal interaction was an effective means of reducing prejudice towards an outgroup. Subsequent research has paired Allport’s hypothesis with Horton and Wohl’s (1956) *parasocial interaction*—mass media’s ability to create an illusion of relationship between individuals portrayed in mass media and their audience—to demonstrate the effect of second-hand contact on audience attitudes (Schiappa, Gregg, and Hewes 2005). The resulting *parasocial contact hypothesis* (PCH) has been tested in research that demonstrates mediated interaction can reduce audience prejudice. Schiappa et al. (2005) found that forced exposure to positive portrayals of gay men (via experimental design) lowered levels of prejudice towards gay men, and replicated these results by analysing self-guided viewing (Schiappa, Gregg, and Hewes 2006).

Notably, Schiappa et al (2006) found PCH effects were most pronounced for audiences who had the lowest amount of first-hand social contact with the target group. Findings here hold particular relevance to the current study because the majority (59%) of undocumented

immigrants live in just six states (Pew Research Center 2016), suggesting that a good deal of the US population is unlikely to have undocumented friends or family—a fact that enables media to play a more prominent role in influencing public opinion about and representing immigrants. Blinder and Jeannete (2018) suggest that media exposure to immigrants “influence[s] public opinion by...shaping political cognition, or simply the mental images of immigrants that individuals hold in their minds” (1446). Because of the existing research pointing to the prevalence of negative attention to immigrants in media, we predicted that respondents without first-hand interactions with immigrants may have more negative attitudes towards them, and that, given the existing positive support for the contact hypothesis, respondents who knew at least one undocumented immigrant would be more likely to have positive attitudes towards immigrants generally.

Demographic and ideological influences

Implicit to discussions of how individuals view broad populations, such as undocumented immigrants, is the influence of the individual’s own demographic profile. Perhaps the most obvious demographic variable would be the individual’s ethnic and/or racial identity, given that national origin and socially-constructed racialized identities serve as the main delimiters separating US citizens from immigrant populations. The US is a majority White population (76.9%) as of July 2016, and the discourse around undocumented immigrants tends to frame them as non-White—recent Pew data shows that of the top five countries of birth for US immigrants and refugees (separate counts), none are majority-White nations (López and Bialik 2017). Studies such as Chandler and Tsai (2001) have demonstrated that this majority group has the highest negative opinions associated with immigration broadly, and Hood and Morris (1998) found that while white populations tend to support immigration when the number of

undocumented immigrants is low, this support diminishes as migrant populations grow in size. This existing research suggests attitudes towards immigrants are likely to shift along with current changes affecting national demographics. The US Census Bureau (2017) reported that during 2015-2016, the growth of every reported racial and ethnic minority outpaced Whites, and these trends are expected to continue.

Other demographic factors can also influence our attitudes towards social groups. For example, in meta-analytic work, Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) found that contact hypothesis effects seemed to diminish (although still significant, $r = -.197$, $k = 238$) for adult populations, as compared to younger populations. Scott (1998) argued that older adults might have less incentive to alter their perspectives on social issues (in her study, sexual morality), and a broader discussion of the relationship between age and social tolerance on a wide range of issues points to the “cohort replacement” hypothesis (Hyman and Sheatsley 1956; Stouffer 1955 by which conservative social beliefs tend to diminish as younger generations enter adulthood. With respect to undocumented immigration, both Chandler and Tsai (2001) and Espenshade and Calhoun (1993) found that age was the strongest predictor of negative attitudes. Gender effects have also been observed, with Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) finding contact hypothesis effects to be stronger for female respondents, although (again) both Chandler and Tsai (2001) and Espenshade and Calhoun (1993) found female respondents to be significantly more negative in their perceptions of undocumented immigrants than male respondents.

Given the politicization of undocumented immigrants in the US, political ideology might also influence perceptions of undocumented immigrants. Using General Social Survey data, Chandler and Tsai (2001) found political conservatism to be a significant predictor of negative attitudes of both legal and illegal immigration in the US; the aforementioned Gravelle (2016)

also found Republicans to have more negative views towards undocumented immigrants, particularly in counties with large Hispanic populations. Such findings are in line with general trends for US Republicans (more conservative) to prioritize immigration reforms and extreme immigration penalties such as deportation, as recently as the 2010 US House elections (Jones and Martin 2017); these same campaigning patterns were covered extensively in Abrajano and Hajnel (2015). Graham, Haidt, and Nosek (2009) demonstrated that political conservatives tend to place more importance on the value of the in-group/loyalty (they are averse to out-group members, such as minorities), authority/respect (they are more in favour of social order, so anyone labelled as “illegal” or “undocumented” would be seen as a threat), and even purity/sanctity (they view minorities as a threat to racial and religious harmony). These data all point to the expectation that political conservatism would be related to increased negative attitudes towards undocumented immigrants.

Interrogating ignorance about undocumented immigrants

Bishop (2019) conducted qualitative interviews with forty undocumented immigrants and found many of them believe both that US citizens generally know too little about undocumented immigration, and that more knowledge would lead to greater acceptance and more positive attitudes toward undocumented immigrants. A young woman undocumented woman explained, “Most native- born citizens. . . know very little about immigration. From the reasons that drive people here, especially North America’s role in perpetuating violence and poverty in South America, to the complicated, expensive and time-consuming application system, and especially the limits and restrictions undocumented folks have without legal documents. And I know this from the ignorant comments I’ve seen and that have been directed at me” (137). Another undocumented interviewee lamented, “There’s a lot of ignorance...If there was more information

out there, if people knew more why there [are] people coming to this country and their methods and their background, there would be a lot more understanding” (136). A third remarked, “Nobody has any idea what immigration laws are. It’s so frustrating. Everybody has this concept— ‘You just got to do it legally. Make a line like everyone else— like *our* ancestors did” (135). These undocumented individuals’ experiences suggest a lack in US residents’ understanding about immigration law and policy, the hardships of undocumented life, and the options available to undocumented people. But to know the extent to which these individuals’ anecdotal experiences are representative of a broader ignorance in the US public about undocumented immigration, we must take a wider, more empirical view.

A 2015 Pew Research Report demonstrated that US Americans have “Relatively little knowledge about US immigration facts”—the majority of the more than 2,000 participants surveyed overestimated the number of undocumented immigrants in the US and misidentified the nations from which incoming undocumented immigrants originate. A more recent Ipsos poll (2018; $n = 1004$) suggests that this lack of knowledge has persisted over the last three years; almost half of US Americans (47%) believe undocumented immigrants currently make up more than 10% of the population in the US (in fact only about 3% of people in the US are undocumented) and about three quarters (74%) incorrectly believe that “The Latino population is the fastest growing demographic group in America” (in fact Pacific Islanders and Asian American populations have grown by a larger share in recent years).

Scholars such as Mills (2013), Proctor (2008), Sullivan (2007), and Tuana (2007) have asserted that ignorance is ideological rather than neutral. Social actors may preserve or even cultivate ignorance in order to advance some goal. For this reason, Sullivan (2007) suggests that rather than defining ignorance as a mere lack of knowledge, ignorance should be understood as

“an active production of particular kinds of knowledges for various social or cultural purposes” (154). When read through this lens, it becomes clear that knowledge and ignorance work in tandem, one helping to perpetuate the other.

Immigrant rights activist groups such as United We Dream and Define American have attempted to confront and mitigate ignorance about immigrants by drawing attention to the ways immigration strengthens the US economy, pointing out that immigrants without legal status are less likely than US born citizens to commit crimes or be incarcerated, and raising awareness about the declining numbers of incoming undocumented Latino/as (See Bishop 2019). But to know whether these efforts have the potential to produce measurable results on US citizens’ and lawful permanent residents’ attitudes and knowledge about undocumented immigrants, more work is necessary that considers knowledge and attitudes in tandem.

Research questions

There exists ample evidence for widespread and bipartisan support for undocumented immigrants receiving a path to citizenship, and of a lack of US residents’ knowledge about undocumented immigration, but it is not yet clear from this evidence whether positive attitudes towards and ignorance about undocumented immigrants are mutually constitutive—that is, whether individuals in the same sampling frame (i.e., the participants in our study) would exhibit both favourable attitudes towards and ignorance about undocumented immigrants. We address this gap in the literature by posing the following questions:

RQ 1: What (if any) influence does interpersonal contact, demographics, and political ideology have on a person’s attitudes towards undocumented immigrants?

RQ 2: What (if any) misunderstanding and misinformation is present in a diverse sample of young, urban US residents' understanding of undocumented immigration?

RQ 3: To what extent might favourable attitudes toward and ignorance about undocumented immigrants exist in the same sample of participants?

Materials and methods

In Spring 2016, prior to the most recent US Presidential elections but at a time in which campaigning was highly active, students at Baruch College—a public, urban campus of the City University of New York (CUNY) in midtown Manhattan—completed a survey in their communication classes. Notably, at least three percent of the population at Baruch is comprised of undocumented students; New York is one of the eighteen states that have laws allowing undocumented students to pay in-state tuition, significantly reducing the cost of higher education for this population. In the past several years, Baruch has hosted several events designed to support undocumented students, and to encourage interaction between undocumented students and other students, including a DREAMer storytelling performance, student club meetings for undocumented students and allies, an immigration teach-in, and a screenings of undocumented students' documentary films. The *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Hammond 2017) recently recognized Baruch as among the top fifteen most ethnically diverse four-year colleges in the US. Because of these factors, students at Baruch are likely to share classes with undocumented immigrants and/or encounter first-hand information about them that goes beyond popular media portrayals.

Participants

In all, 231 undergraduate students voluntarily and anonymously participated by completing the paper survey, without reimbursement—these participants provided complete data, and represent 86% of the survey’s initial response rate of 269. We obtained tacit informed consent from all participants. Half ($n = 115$) of the respondents who reported a gender identity identified as male and half ($n = 115$) as female, with one participant not responding. About 75% of the sample ($n = 173$) was aged between 19 and 24 years old, and the largest ethnic groups were Asian ($n = 79$, 34%), White ($n = 68$, 29%), Hispanic ($n = 43$, 19%) and Black ($n = 24$, 10%). Just under half ($n = 111$, 48%) identified as Democrats and another fourth ($n = 62$, 27%) were Undecided, with $n = 17$ (7%) Republicans and $n = 30$ (13%) independents. Over two-thirds of the sample were US citizens by birth ($n = 156$, 68%). According to the New York State Board of Elections report closest to the timing of our study (April 2016) 68.6% of enrolled voters in New York City are Democrats and 10.3% are Republicans, so this study had an underrepresentation of both Democrats and Republicans and a higher number of undecided participants when compared to the city generally.

Measures

Attitudes towards undocumented immigrants

The following three items were created to measure common negative attitudes expressed towards immigrants, such as “Undocumented immigrants are a drain to society,” “Undocumented immigrants are a US problem,” and “Undocumented immigrants should be deported.” These items were part of an exploratory 10-item poll that included items such as “Undocumented immigrants are lazy” and “I am concerned about undocumented immigrants,” but principal axis factoring using oblimin rotation suggested that the items “drain to society” (primary factor loading of .873), “US problem” (.793) and “should be deported” (.731) clustered

strongly around the same construct, whereas the other items did not clearly load onto an underlying latent factor (no primary loadings stronger than .600). These three items had an acceptable internal consistency ($\alpha = .841$), and participants showed overall lower agreement with the items as a whole, $M = 2.26$, $SD = .879$ (on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”); the observed mean was significantly lower than the scale midpoint of 3.00, $t(230) = 12.8$, $p < .001$.

Estimated number of undocumented immigrants

Participants were asked to estimate how many undocumented immigrants currently resided in the US. To avoid “guesstimates,” participants were provided with one of six options: less than one million, one to five million, five to 10 million, 10 to 15 million, 15 to 20 million, and more than 20 million. The response consistent with estimates of the undocumented immigrant population in 2015 from the US Department of Homeland Security and the Pew Research Center, both of which draft their estimates from data drawn from the US Census Bureau, is 10 to 15 million. The median response was 10 to 15 million, which was reported by $n = 75$ respondents (32.3%), with others overestimating ($n = 73$, or 31.6%) and underestimating ($n = 83$, or 35.9%) the number of undocumented immigrants in the United States.

Interpersonal contact with undocumented immigrants

Participants were asked a single “yes/no” question as to if they personally knew an undocumented immigrant, and 56% indicated that they did.

Open-ended data

Participants were asked to provide open-ended responses to two items: first, to the statement “Describe an undocumented immigrant,” and second, to the question, “What options are available for undocumented immigrants who want to become U.S. citizens?” All participants

provided data, with an average word count $M = 17.8$ ($SD = 9.55$, Median = 16, Minimum = 1, Maximum = 70) for the first question, and $M = 11.6$ ($SD = 10.5$, Median = 8, Minimum = 1, Maximum = 61) for the second.

Results

Because this brief survey invited both quantitative and open-ended responses, we used a mixed-methods approach to data analysis and conducted both a regression model and open-ended coding of emergent themes.

Regression model

To understand the influence of demographics (age, gender, ethnicity), political affiliation, citizenship/residency status, and familiarity with undocumented immigrants on respondents' negative attitudes towards immigration, we conducted a linear regression analysis. In this regression, negative attitudes were regressed on the following variables: age (lower scores indicating lower age categories); gender (female respondents as the referent group); individual dummy-codes for ethnicity in which Whites were the referent group for Asians, Blacks, and Hispanics; political affiliation (Democrats as the referent group for Republicans, Independents, and Undecided); citizenship (US-born citizens as the referent group for naturalized citizens, immigrants, and visiting international students); knowledge about the number of immigrants in the US (individuals with accurate knowledge as the referent group for individuals who either under- or over-estimated these figures); and having known personally an undocumented immigrant (individuals who know an undocumented immigrant as the referent group).

This regression model was significant, $F_{14,186} = 5.47$, $p < .001$, Adjusted $R^2 = .240$, and showed no evidence of problematic auto-correlation (Durbin-Watson = 1.90). Table 1 reports the specific regression coefficients that were significantly related to respondents' negative attitudes

towards undocumented immigrants. This analysis shows that older respondents, respondents who belonged to any political party except the Democratic Party, and individuals who both over- and under-estimated the correct number of undocumented immigrants in the US were all more likely to have increased negative attitudes towards undocumented immigrants. Likewise, Hispanics (as compared to Whites) and individuals who were themselves immigrants had had significantly lower negative attitudes towards undocumented immigrants.

[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

Open-ended coding

To analyse the qualitative components of the survey and address *RQ2*, we used open-ended coding of emergent themes. Specifically, we wanted to know to what extent respondents could detail what makes a person “undocumented” and whether they could clearly identify the relationship between undocumented status and the possibility of citizenship. Knowing this insight would help to illuminate areas of misunderstanding about current US immigration policy, and to interpret more broadly the relationship between respondents’ demographic attributes and the nature of their knowledge about immigrants.

The primary author first completed a close reading of the qualitative responses to two items from the survey: “Describe an undocumented immigrant” and “What options are available for undocumented immigrants who want to become U. S. citizens?” Participants’ answers to each item were separated from the remainder of the items to consider them in isolation. Each participant’s response to each of the two survey items was first considered in its entirety, and then coded into emergent and non-mutually exclusive themes. For the first item, “Describe an undocumented immigrant,” we identified seven themes, in addition to a theme we called “other” to represent singular responses that did not occur elsewhere—for example: “An individual who

is not registered under any governmental institution.” Codes that occurred with enough frequency to be analysed (mentioned by more than 10% of participants) were “entered illegally” (39% of participants) and “no documentation” (41% of participants). Examples of the “entered illegally” theme include responses such as “An undocumented immigrant is an individual who was not born in the US and came here illegally” and “Someone who has come into the US or any country illegally.” Examples of the “no documentation” theme include responses such as “Someone who is living in the country who cannot prove they have required papers to live here” and “An undocumented immigrant is someone in the country without legit paper work.” The prominence of these two themes suggests that participants tend to associate being undocumented with a lack of legal status rather than some personal attribute(s) or reason(s) for leaving their hometowns and arriving in the United States. The frequency of these codes was equally likely across all groups of age, political affiliation, citizenship, and exposure; they all essentially define an immigrant the same way.

For the second item, “What options are available for undocumented immigrants to become U.S. citizens,” we identified nine non-mutually exclusive themes, in addition to a theme we called “other” to represent singular responses that did not occur elsewhere—for example: “Wait to come here legally & with documents.” Codes that occurred with enough frequency to be analysed (mentioned by more than 10% of participants) were “marriage” (27% of participants), “citizenship test” (24% of participants), “don’t know” (17% of participants), “green card” (16% of participants), and “visa” (14% of participants).

The diverse answers to the above question confirm a lack of knowledge surrounding the relationship of undocumented immigration to citizenship, and a good deal of variety in that ignorance. While a Green Card or marriage may in some cases allow an undocumented

immigrant to gain legal permanent residence (US citizen spouses of undocumented immigrants can submit an I-130 “Petition for Alien Relative”), these processes do not grant citizenship, which has a different and strict set of eligibility requirements, including continuous residence for a number of years, the ability to read and write English, a determination of “good moral character,” and passing a citizenship test. The citizenship test cannot grant citizenship to immigrants without legal status, though it was mentioned by 24% of respondents as an option available to undocumented immigrants. Even if an undocumented immigrant was able in theory to meet each of the eligibility requirements for citizenship listed above, they would still be legally excluded from citizenship. Finally, the US government currently does not provide Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) recipients a path toward citizenship and working/student visas are not available to undocumented immigrants.

When considering these findings in conjunction with the demographic characteristics of the participants, we found that US born citizens were most likely to refer to the “citizenship test” ($n = 41$), $\chi^2(5) = 14.25$, $p = .014$, Cramer’s $V = .248$. Individuals who knew immigrants were most likely to refer to “citizenship by marriage” ($n = 37$), $\chi^2(1) = 4.90$, $p = .027$, $\phi = .156$; and least likely to refer to the “citizenship test” ($n = 18$) as a path to citizenship, $\chi^2(1) = 9.47$, $p = .002$, Cramer’s $V = .217$. The finding that US-born citizens are unlikely to be familiar with the eligibility requirements for citizenship points to the reality that because US-born individuals receive *jus soli*—literally, “right of the soil”—citizenship, they may never have a need to familiarize themselves with the citizenship process. Individuals who knew immigrants were least likely to refer to the citizenship test as a means to citizenship for undocumented people, offering support for the idea that intergroup contact may work to mitigate ignorance.

Discussion

Our study investigated two broad research questions to understand better how a diverse cohort of college students at a diverse, urban campus with a notable population of undocumented immigrant students and community members might form their attitudes towards undocumented immigrants, as well as their knowledge of US immigration policy and procedures. In investigating both, we also wondered if individuals would report both positive attitudes toward undocumented immigrants and ignorance about the current status of undocumented immigrants in the United States. Our findings indicated that respondents' attitudes towards undocumented immigrants are largely favourable (or at least, tend to disagree with negative attitudes about undocumented immigrants), but that the respondents lack a good deal of knowledge about undocumented immigrants' rights and options, and about the relationship of undocumented immigration to citizenship. These findings are detailed and extended below.

Influences on attitudes towards undocumented immigrants

Perhaps unsurprisingly, respondents who identified with any political party other than Democrat were the most likely to have negative views about undocumented immigrants. Such a finding is copacetic with the historical and contemporary framing of immigration broadly, and undocumented immigration specifically, as an issue that clearly divides liberals and conservatives. Self-identified Republicans in particular had the most negative views towards undocumented immigrants as compared to other political affiliations. Although we should note that, overall, participants in our study did not offer strong endorsement of the negative perceptions of immigrants such as them being a “drain to society” who “should be deported,” and “are a problem,” a follow-up inspection of the scores from Republicans ($M = 2.96$, $SD = .882$) shows that they were the only group that did not differ from the scale neutral point, $t(16) = .226$, $p = .824$. In other words, while the sub-group does not openly endorse strong negative

views, they also do not reject negative stereotypes of undocumented immigrants. This finding is also aligned with moral psychology research, which suggests that conservatives tend to place an implicit priority on issues of in-group protection and adherence to authority (Graham, Haidt, and Nosek 2009)—both of which undocumented immigrants are perceived to threaten. As also found in past research, older participants were also more likely to harbour negative attitudes towards immigrants, which generally reflects concerns that older adults might be less motivated towards social change and tend to be more inclined to support the status quo. Moreover, there was no statistical association between age and self-identified Republican affiliation.

The correlation between respondents who know at least one undocumented immigrant and more positive attitudes towards immigrants shows support for Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis and suggests the potential effectiveness of immigrant rights strategies that introduce undocumented immigrants—either in person or via media—to the voting public. This finding offers encouraging support for the potential of initiatives such as the DREAMer storytelling performance and screenings of undocumented students' documentary films—initiatives that Baruch College promotes.

Misinformation about undocumented immigrants

In contrast to Pew's 2015 report in which the majority of respondents overestimated the number of undocumented immigrants in the US, in our study, the largest group of respondents underestimated the number of undocumented immigrants in the US ($n = 83, 35.9\%$), and the next largest group ($n = 75, 32.3\%$) correctly estimated the number. But the respondents demonstrated a lack of understanding about the relationship of undocumented migration and citizenship specifically, and the difference between undocumented and legal migration more generally. Responses such as “An undocumented immigrant is an immigrant who is not a citizen of the

United States, but works and has a family/place of residence,” and “Someone who has moved to this country from another and does not have American citizenship” indicate an incorrect assumption that the factor that makes some immigrants undocumented is a lack of citizenship. Because even immigrants who enter the country legally cannot in most cases gain citizenship for a period of at least five years, these responses indicate participants’ conflation of immigrants without legal status who are not citizens with non-citizen immigrants with legal status. Responses to the question “What options are available to undocumented immigrants who want to become US citizens”—suggestions such as “Become naturalized. Take a citizenship test,” and “Naturalization is an option,” and “After many years if they pay all their taxes, they can apply for citizenship”—confirm this conflation. These responses suggest that the participants believe that a path to citizenship already exists for undocumented immigrants—a belief that shows a lack of understanding that the primary goal of the immigrant rights movement is to create this path.

While the majority of the participants in this survey are eligible (via age and citizenship) to vote in the US for candidates who may either support or work against undocumented immigrants, ignorance about who undocumented immigrants are and the challenges they face may prohibit US residents from both empathy and political efficacy. If they are unaware that undocumented people currently have no path to citizenship, they have little reason to support organizations and/or legislation that works to advance this goal. Our finding that this lack of understanding exists even in such a diverse survey population suggests that ignorance about the topic of undocumented immigration is pervasive, and not only likely to occur in areas where few undocumented immigrants live or where a conservative political climate creates a culture of immigrant exclusion.

Limitations, recommendations, and future research

This single-location survey using a convenience sample should be replicated in other contexts to determine its validity and reproducibility. At the same time, the site of this survey was relevant to our research in that it represented a diverse urban population with direct and indirect exposure to issues of undocumented immigration.

This survey was conducted seven months before Donald Trump was elected President of the United States. We recommend an update to this study from within the context of the Trump presidency. Existing research has analysed “The Trump Hypothesis”—that immigrants are more likely to engage in criminal behaviour—and found no correlation between the size of the immigrant population and violent crime (Green 2016; see also Rumbaut and Ewing [2007] for historical consistency of this finding). Yet, such a theme is a common one in many interpersonal, masspersonal (i.e., social media groups dedicated to Trump-related causes), and mass media reports (in particular from more conservative-leaning networks). As such, more work is needed to know the impact of the Trump Hypothesis on attitudes towards immigrants, and how factual knowledge of immigration might affect endorsement of the same. Exposure to partisan media might also play a role in endorsements here, given the tendency toward news and editorial content that reinforces held beliefs.

Our data indicated that older respondents were less likely to have favourable attitudes towards immigrants. However, it is not clear from the survey design of this project whether this could be explained as a changing tide that points to a coming evolution in voters’ disposition towards immigrants, or instead might be evidence of a “cohort replacement” effect (referenced above) in which younger generations with different attitudes gradually replace older generations.

This project demonstrated a link between knowing an undocumented immigrant and more positive feelings towards immigrants more generally, suggesting that schools and

immigrant rights organizations interested in increasing positive sentiment towards undocumented immigrants may find ample potential in promoting opportunities for interaction between undocumented immigrants and others. Events such as the DREAMer storytelling night and student club meetings for undocumented students mentioned earlier as being hosted by Baruch College are promising venues for attitude development; such events should prioritize contact between undocumented individuals and others in order to maximize the potential of intergroup interaction to increase positive attitudes.

We recommend a future project that could offer more attention to the relationship between positive feelings and knowing undocumented immigrants by conducting a pre-test/post-test of respondents' attitudes towards immigrants before and after an opportunity to engage with an undocumented person, either through listening to recorded interviews, in a storytelling context, or, more simply, being introduced to someone who has lived without legal status in an environment that controls for other variables. Future work should also take care to examine the quality and the quantity of respondents' direct experiences with undocumented immigrants, taking into account the different kinds of contact/relationships (i.e. friend, acquaintance, colleague) between undocumented immigrants and citizens (Mak et al., 2013; Hooghe and de Vroome 2015). Future work might also more directly probe the possibility that individuals may harbour conflicting negative and positive views towards immigrants or hold positive views despite their ignorance of immigration facts and policies (see Dorner, Crawford, Jennings, and Sandoval 2017).

Conclusion

This work reveals that understanding the relationship between recent attention to undocumented immigration in public media and US residents' continued misunderstanding about

who undocumented immigrants are and the options that are available to them requires looking beyond simple explanations such as unanimous xenophobia or a lack of available information. If, as this study suggests, immigration reform depends on the votes of US citizens who hold positive attitudes about immigrants receiving a path to citizenship but do not understand the legal changes necessary to achieve it, immigrant rights advocates may have better chances of attaining reform if they confront this ignorance head on. Only by critically interrogating the relationship of knowledge about and attitudes towards immigration can one understand the implications of ignorance and its interplay with the widespread and bipartisan support for a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants.

Funding

This work was supported with funding from the City University of New York's Diversity Projects Development Fund.

Acknowledgments

Many thanks to Dr. Bishop's research assistants, Greta Kastner and Nora Lambrecht, for their fastidious work.

Declaration of interest statement

The authors report no conflicts of interest.

Table 1. Regression analysis results.

	β	t	p -value	r_{partial}	VIF
(Constant)		5.631	.000		
Age	.193	2.802	.006	.173	1.247
Gender	.098	1.528	.128	.094	1.073
Ethnicity (White as referent)					
Asians	.012	.156	.876	.010	1.444
Blacks	-.093	-1.315	.190	-.081	1.305
Hispanics	-.155	-2.095	.037	-.129	1.440
Political Affiliation (Democrats as referent)					
Republicans	.282	4.167	.000	.257	1.201
Independents	.148	2.281	.024	.141	1.107
Undecided	.199	2.906	.004	.179	1.234
Citizenship/Residence Status (US citizens as referent)					
Naturalised	-.075	-1.144	.254	-.071	1.133
Immigrant	-.203	-2.983	.003	-.184	1.218
Visiting International Student	.045	.673	.502	.042	1.155
Estimates of # of Undocumented Immigrants (Correct estimate as referent)					
Overestimated	.177	2.467	.015	.152	1.352
Underestimated	.253	3.373	.001	.208	1.475
Do you know any undocumented immigrants (yes as referent)?	.112	1.632	.104	.101	1.232

Note: Regression coefficients that explain a significant amount of variance ($p < .05$ or greater) are presented in bold, to ease interpretation.

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