

The University of Chicago

Rerouted Ambitions: The Repercussions of the Real ID Act

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Abstract

The upcoming enforcement of the Real ID Act will severely limit the transportation, education, and socioeconomic mobility of undocumented college students. I examine how the Real ID Act operates to further exacerbate already existing geographies of deportability and opportunity gaps for those in border towns, with a forced reroute through fixed internal immigration checkpoints. In addition to an incorporation of existing literature, I conduct two in-depth interviews with college students who are impacted by their inability to obtain a Real ID. These interviews illustrate how fixed internal immigration checkpoints create an entrapment of undocumented people that shape their educational opportunities. These findings give insight into how the Real ID Act entrenches undocumented people into an existing cycle of limited mobility, and ultimately restrict their belonging in this country.

“I did everything right,” Emily, a 22-year-old at a community college, said. “And I still wasn’t able to continue my education.” It wasn’t always like this for “Emily,” who asked to be identified with a pseudonym. An accomplished high school graduate, she started her first year as a political science major at one of the top institutions in the country. As a first-generation immigrant and only daughter of a single mother, she defied generational odds when she got into her dream school. Despite impressive academic credentials and a packed resume of community involvement, Emily could not keep attending the university that had once represented her future. Because the risk wasn’t worth it anymore. Because she’s undocumented.

With the enforcement of the Real ID Act, the barriers are becoming insurmountable for students like Emily. To obtain a Real ID, and subsequently to be allowed to fly by plane, a person must present proof of lawful residence in the United States (U.S.). Without the ability to fly, going back to a college 1,300 miles away became too risky. With rerouted ambitions, she transferred to a local community college. And there are many others like Emily who are undocumented or in mixed-status families. In this essay, I seek to answer the question: how does the Real ID Act play into an increasingly restrictive system of surveillance and control that limits mobility, both spatial and socio-economic, for undocumented immigrants?

In what follows, I first describe what a Real ID is, including the ways that undocumented immigrants are restricted from obtaining one, and the historical context behind its enactment. Through an analysis of scholarly and popular literature and with insights from two in-depth interviews, I explore the lived realities of students affected by these restrictions. The interviews highlight how the Act forces people to look to alternatives through transportation, where they are met with further restriction in internal immigration checkpoints that increase the risk of deportation, exacerbated through the discretion in street-level bureaucrats. Restrictive

transportation mobility then impedes access to education, which calls into question the value of meritocracy for undocumented students and the ultimate social exclusion they face based on their status. Both interviewees were college students that live in Texas border towns and are directly affected by the Real ID Act, and, more generally, by the immigration system, though in differing ways. Emily, an undocumented student, was forced onto a different educational path as a direct result of these restrictive policies. Laura, a U.S. citizen with undocumented family members, experiences its consequences through the constant navigation of her family’s legal precarity. Their stories illuminate the ways in which policies like the Real ID Act reshape and circumscribe futures.

What is a Real ID?

A real ID refers to a specific form of authentication on driver’s licenses, which incorporates a star in the top right corner of the design.



Figure 1: Example of a Real ID. Source: “REAL ID,” n.d., <https://realid.ilsos.gov/>.

A real ID only applies to driver’s licenses and state IDs; it differs from non-real IDs in that it implements standardization across identity documents (ILSOS, n.d). An ID that does not

have the star will only be accepted for state-specific things (like voting), but cannot be used for federal purposes, like flying or entering federal buildings (DPS, n.d). While implementing the real ID program is a federal requirement, each state has slightly different guidelines for the type of documentation they require to obtain a real ID. For example, Texas requires proof of identity, date of birth, social security number, and primary residence proof (DPS, n.d). While California just requires a proof of identity, and two proofs of residency (DMV CA, n.d). However, they all require one underlying thing: the person must present proof of legal residence in the country. As of May 7th, 2025, the federal government is requiring that all individuals above the age of 18 flying on domestic flights present a real ID at the TSA checkpoint.

Why does the Real ID Matter?

For most Americans, obtaining a Real ID is at best an inconvenient trip to the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV). But for over 16 million undocumented people living in the U.S (Fazel-Zarandi et.al. 2018), it represents a significant loss of travel options. Once the requirement takes effect, undocumented residents will likely never get to fly by plane again in the U.S. Not only will this system act as a way to limit the already slim privileges that undocumented people receive in this country, but it will also have serious implications for undocumented students' access to higher education, especially if one's campus is far away. Students like Emily, who relied on air travel to get to and from college every year, will face new obstacles on an already difficult path for undocumented students, who are often first-generation college students.

The barrier is especially significant when considering the transition into adulthood in the U.S. system. As minors, children can travel without identification under the responsibility of a parent or guardian (FAA, n.d). But upon crossing the threshold into adulthood, people are expected to navigate the world independently. For undocumented students, the transition isn't just about gaining independence, it's about confronting new limitations. The inability to fly also affected mixed-status families, where even U.S-born children, like Laura, may be unable to travel as their undocumented parents cannot present identification on their behalf. The Real ID Act reinforces a system where adulthood comes with freedom for some and restrictions for others, widening the gap in opportunity and mobility.

A Real ID serves as a legal marker of residency in the U.S., but its absence carries just as much weight. Currently, 19 U.S. states allow for undocumented people to obtain a government issued driver's license or identification card (NCSL 2023). However, they are considered noncompliant cards, meaning they are not accepted as Real IDs, and must be a different color to differentiate the two (DHS 2025). For undocumented people, being unable to obtain a Real ID becomes an implicit revelation of their status. Even for those who never board a plane, the act of being denied a Real ID reinforces a system of surveillance and exclusion.

Are there exceptions to using the Real ID for air travel?

Not necessarily. People can still board domestic flights through various other identification forms, such as passports (both national and foreign), border crossing cards, transportation worker credentials, etc. (Immigrants Rising, n.d). However, these alternative forms of identification cannot (mostly) be legally obtained by undocumented people. Even

though foreign passports are an acceptable form of identification for domestic (and international) travel, it is contingent on their expiration date. Many immigrants that come into the U.S do have a passport from their home country, and became ‘undocumented’ from an overstayed travel visa (Pew Research Center 2018). Depending on the number of years that they’ve been in this country, however, they likely do not have a viable passport anymore or the option to renew it.

Even when an undocumented traveler does have a valid passport, presenting it at airport security comes with significant risks. The Transportation Security Administration (TSA) and U.S Customs and Border Protection (CBP) both operate under the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), an agency heavily involved in the immigration enforcement system (DHS, n.d). Because of this shared directive, TSA screening protocols align with broader border security measures, systemically reinforcing the same restrictive framework. TSA officers have the authority to refer suspected travelers to immigration officers at airports (CBP, n.d), a risk heightened in border town airports where CBP agents are frequently present (Validivia 2023). For many undocumented individuals, the possibility of being flagged for additional screening, which can escalate to detention, makes air travel too dangerous to attempt, regardless of the identification they possess.

How did the Real ID Act Come to Be in the First Place?

It’s hard to imagine a world without long TSA lines. Prior to 9/11, though, air travelers did not need an ID or even a boarding pass to get to an airport gate. Jeff Price, an aviation security expert, says in an NPR article. “All you had to do was go through the security checkpoint— no questions asked, no ID needed” (David 2021). TSA was nonexistent, and

security was designated to private contractors hired by airlines; very different from the strict process many of us are used to today.

Talks about the Real ID have been going on for such a long time, that many likely thought the requirement was already in place. The Real ID Act initially passed in 2005, two decades before its enforcement. The Act was passed in response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks as an effort to standardize sources of identification, and to reduce identity fraud and terrorism (DHS 2024). In the 20 years between the proposal and its enforcement, people have been able to fly with virtually any form of identification. Additionally, undocumented residents of the 19 U.S. states that issue noncompliant cards have been able to even fly with a lawful driver's license.

The Act has experienced many extensions in the last two decades, garnering strong state opposition since its passing in 2005. In 2008, just three years later, 21 states had passed legislation in opposition to its implementation (Lin 2009). A major point of contention has been the burden that the Act places on state agencies, particularly DMV workers, who are responsible for the extensive documentation and verification processes this Act requires. The administrative strain led to concerns about resource allocation and feasibility.

Beyond the financial and administrative costs, there is a growing recognition of the Act's disproportionate impact on undocumented immigrants. The Act is "unusual in that it illogically focuses on shoring up an asylum system that already was a difficult and unattractive means of gaining legal status in the United States" (Silenzi Cianciarulo 2006). While the Act presents itself as a measure for standardization and national security, its effects on undocumented communities are neither incidental nor unintended. The Act's focus on identity verifications operates within a broader system that already makes legal status difficult to obtain, further

heightening the barriers to mobility. For Emily, it's a requirement that is intrusive and unnecessary:

It's like a crazy policing of people. There's no need. There's absolutely no need for this to be happening, for this to be in place. It's unnecessary. It's a waste of resources. It makes people feel unsafe. It makes me feel unsafe. Because why? I don't know why we're being policed so so much.

It is impossible to untangle the enactment of the Act from the history of xenophobic policies, racialized surveillance, and the use of documentation as a tool of control. The U.S. has a longstanding history of using identification requirements to police marginalized communities. For enslaved people, access to documentation, or 'free papers', "served as a constant reminder that freedom of mobility and citizenship were elusive rights" (Wilson 2023). While a Real ID is not equivalent to restrictions during slavery, it functions as another mechanism under which the U.S. can regulate and constrain the mobility of brown undocumented immigrants.

If Not by Plane, Then What?

Students that previously depended on air travel to make the trek to and from college will need to find alternatives. Other forms of transportation will need to be considered for students in these positions.

Amtrak, for example, is an option that 32.8 million people take yearly for long distance travel by train (Amtrak 2024). This form of transportation does require a formal ID (such as a passport or driver's license) as it is government-owned, but notably does not require it to be a real ID (Amtrak, n.d). This then means that undocumented people in one of the 19 states that allow them to obtain a noncompliant ID without disclosing immigration status, may take an

Amtrak to college. However, it is a much longer journey compared to domestic flights.

Additionally, there are considerably fewer Amtrak train stations than airports as seen in the map below, with a lot of smaller cities not having a train station within reasonable distance.

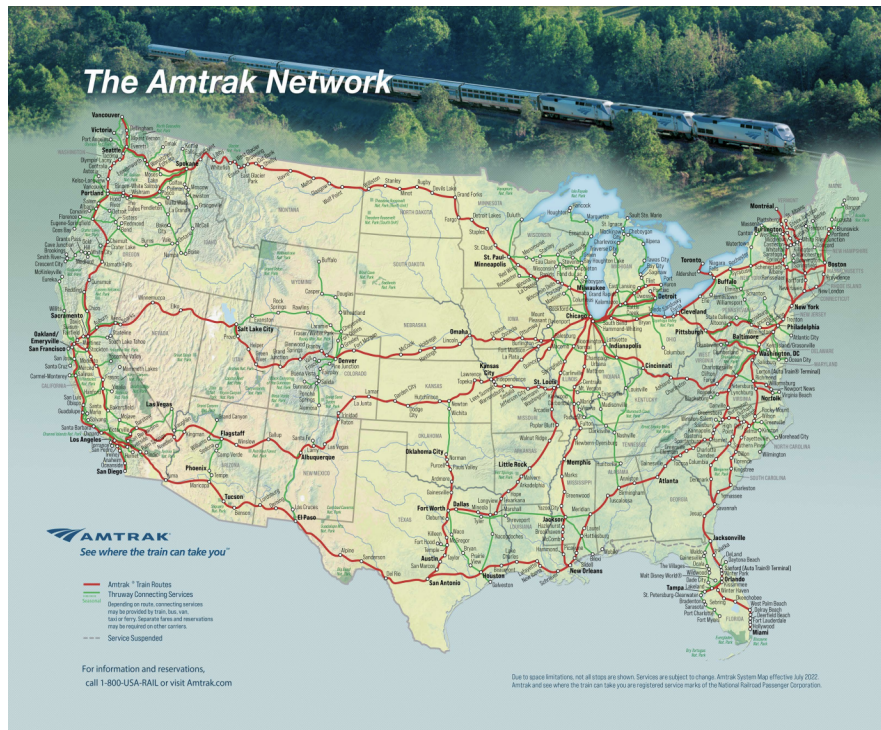


Figure 2: Map of the Amtrak networks and stations in the U.S. Source: “Amtrak Routes & Destinations,” n.d. <https://www.amtrak.com/train-routes>.

In South Texas, where I live, it’s a four-hour drive north to the nearest Amtrak station. From there, the Journey to Chicago is a grueling 32 hours, turning what could have been a short three-hour flight, into a multi-day ordeal. Though having this option is better than nothing, the sheer time and effort required make what once was a routine trip home into a logistical nightmare.

Another option would be a bus trip, but like taking the Amtrak, it would involve over a day and a half of travel. Large bus companies like Greyhound have more lenient ID policies. Nowhere on their website do they even mention identification requirements. However, the

company acknowledges that “immigration enforcement sweeps... have occurred in the past” (Greyhound, n.d), offering little reassurance to undocumented travelers. Since 2013, 250 Greyhound passengers have been detained after immigration officers boarded the buses without a warrant (NY Times 2021). The possibility of being detained mid-journey makes bus travel an unreliable alternative. So, in addition to the journey being incredibly long and arduous (I would have to take two buses just to get to Chicago), undocumented passengers face the unsettling reality that they may not even make it to their destination.

The next obvious (and for a lot of people, the only) option would then be to drive as the main form of transportation after May 7th of this year. Aside from the exhausting reality of a 24-hour nonstop drive, it may not be that easy of an option either when there are internal checkpoints in place to surveil and police undocumented people’s movement.

“Is Everyone in the Car a U.S Citizen?”: Growing Geographies of Deportability

It’s a routine I know all too well. Less than an hour into the drive, the familiar signs start to appear. Silent warnings of what’s ahead. Tall signs announce the approaching immigration checkpoint, flanked by posters displaying the faces of people on their wanted list. Another sign boasts the number of ‘undocumented aliens’ caught so far. It reduces the people to the number they become for the year, as if tracking stats in a game. Against the backdrop of endless plains and scattered trees, the looming structure rises, an unmovable barrier cutting across the road.



Figure 3: Falfurrias Checkpoint line in Texas. Source: Taylor, Steve. “Major Expansion Planned for Falfurrias Checkpoint.” Rio Grande Guardian, July 7, 2023. <https://riograndeguardian.com/major-expansion-planned-for-falfurrias-checkpoint/>.

It hardly differs from the actual border checkpoints that many of those people crossed not even an hour before then. They have the same men in the same uniforms, with the same x-ray machines, asking the same question every time: “Is everyone in the car a U.S citizen?” Successfully crossing the border is not a guaranteed solution for most undocumented immigrants. Surveillance doesn’t stop at the crossing, it follows them, embedded in the very landscape. Along the U.S.- Mexico border, there’s a network of immigration checkpoints no more than an hour north of major border towns. The checkpoints are tactically positioned at major roads and highways, and intentional avoidance is a felony (ACLU, n.d). Although someone could take an alternative route through a more rural area, it still falls under the 100-mile radius that subjects the area to immigration checks. In other words, a deviation from the traditional route does not make a person immune to immigration enforcement.

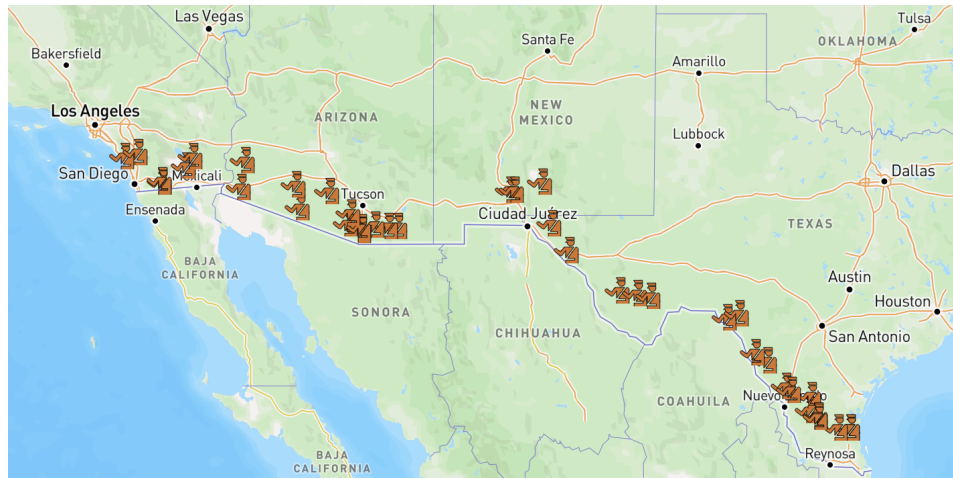


Figure 4: Map of internal checkpoints along the U.S-Mexico Border. Source: “Checkpoint America: Monitoring The Constitution Free Zone,” n.d. <https://www.cato.org/checkpoint-america>

The checkpoints are local-level immigration enforcements that act as a deterrent for people that want to travel further than an hour from where they crossed through. The geographics of deportability refer to “the specific settings where immigration enforcement is localised and thereby heightens the risk of deportation.” (Validivia 2023). These risky areas are ‘hot spots’ that dictate, for many undocumented families, where there are extra immigration reinforcements. Checkpoints like the ones in the map above are fixed hot spots, which are established immigration points that people must stop at when they drive on that road. Thus, living in these border zones subject people to the geographics of deportability that increases their chances of apprehension, and decreases their mobility. Akin to the border itself, people hardly ever make the journey back and forth between this checkpoint, as the risk is simply not worth it. Undocumented classmates from my border town will likely never leave our hometown, or simply not make the journey back if they do get the opportunity to go.

Laura, a U.S citizen through birthright, remembers the moment she realized what the border checkpoint truly meant for her family. She was 12 when she was diagnosed with an autoimmune disease. The best hospitals, the ones that could provide her with life-saving care,

were in Houston. Past the checkpoint. Each time she needed treatment, her father, who is undocumented, would drive her past the looming structure. He knew that at any moment, he could get detained and deported. He risked his livelihood in the country so his daughter could get the care she needed. Reflecting on those trips, Laura outlines her frustrations with the checkpoint:

It instills a little bit of fear in me, not for myself, but just like anger, because my parents are kind of confined to that area in my hometown where they can't really move up or down anymore... I feel like a lot of people don't consider how much not being able to travel would affect you. But it really does. I feel like it takes away from your liberties [as] a human to be able to move around.

Apart from restricting travel for work and educational opportunities, the hotspots instill the sense of fear that Laura shared. The presence of these checkpoints goes beyond the confinement of undocumented people, they create a sense of danger and serve as a constant reminder to the entrapment that undocumented people are subject to (Nuñez and Heyman 2007). Although Laura has legal status in the U.S, no one else in her family does. Her family is not the only one in this situation; there are approximately 4.7 million households that are mixed-status as of 2024 (Lisiecki and Apruzzese 2024). As a daughter in a mixed-status family, Laura has experienced first-hand the unfairness in the privileges she holds for being born just 20 minutes north of her siblings. 20 minutes is all it can take to give someone a completely different trajectory in life; in this case, those 20 minutes mean access to a whole other world.

“The Grace of Whatever Officer was There”: Discretion among Street-level Bureaucrats

Unlike the formal border, there is no guarantee that CBP officers at these inland checkpoints will ask for identification. Some travelers may say they are U.S. citizens regardless

of the truth, be waved through without further scrutiny, and they will continue their 23-hour drive. However, a perceived hesitation, an accent, or even the way someone looks can trigger deeper suspicion. And if the officer detects, or merely suspects, a lie, the consequences extend beyond the individual. Everyone in the car becomes an accomplice. The warning posters along the highway suddenly come to mind, reminding travelers that it is a federal crime to knowingly transport an ‘illegal alien’.

The officers at these checkpoints operate as street-level bureaucrats, wielding significant discretion in deciding who gets to pass without question and who is subject to further interrogation. “[Street-level bureaucrats] exercise wide discretion in decisions about citizens with whom they interact.” (Lipsky 1980, 13). This discretion is not neutral, can be shaped by personal biases, institutional culture, and broader societal narratives about race and immigration. In practice, this means that enforcement is often arbitrary and disproportionately affects people of color. The same law can be applied leniently or harshly, depending on an officer’s perception of who ‘belongs’ and who does not. Emily contends:

Sometimes they just let you through. They don’t even ask you a question. If you look white, you bet you’re going to go through but if you look like how my family looks like, they’re going to stop you. They’re going to question you. They might ask to search you.

Importantly, “CBP officers may search those seeking entry into the United States without a warrant, or even reasonable suspicion” (Gonzales 2015). People don’t know what to expect or how to prepare for these checkpoints. At these checkpoints, racial profiling is more than just a possibility, it is embedded in the system. The very presence of checkpoints merely dozens of miles from the border suggest that undocumented people are always on the move, always evading, always a threat. In a few cases, people’s case tanks and spare tires were actually cut open and searched because of a drug suspicion (Gonzales 2015). While it sounds absurd, it

exemplifies how the position of these officers brings a high degree of inconsistency to the process, that further enforces criminal-like repercussion and surveillance on activities that are not criminal offenses. Being undocumented is a civil violation, the same way that jaywalking is a civil violation (Jarrett 2017). Yet, the level of policing reinforces the sense of exclusion and alienation.

The effects of immigration officers acting as street-level bureaucrats go beyond nonsensical searches. Emily recounts how she was affected by this level of discretion. In her last trip to her college out-of-state, she had gotten stopped at an immigration point, despite having gone through just fine with the exact same documentation, merely months prior. She remembers:

Even though I had the same documentation, they did not want to let me through. And I got stopped. And that felt very scary, because at that point I was like, my family wasn't with me. I was 19. I didn't know what to do.

After a while of interrogation, the “grace of whatever officer was there” let her through with her university ID. She had gotten through all the times before this, but this moment made her realize that the risk was a lot closer than she thought. She remembered thinking it as a fluke, a small bump on the road on her way to school, because she wasn't doing anything wrong, and should not have gotten stopped in the first place. Although the Real ID system had not been in place at the time (and still hasn't as of now), the sentiments of suspicion and surveillance were. Importantly, the inconsistency of these interactions made it hard for her to prepare for her next trip back to college. The risk and uncertainty of it all was no longer worth it. After a long, difficult, and sad conversation with her family, she made the decision to transfer to a local community college after her first year at one of the top institutions in the country.

Educational Mobility

The difference that education can make is astronomical. “Education has a fundamental role in maintaining the fabric of our society” (Underwood 2015, 76). Education is undoubtedly one of the biggest contributors to upward mobility in the U.S. Higher education, such as a bachelor’s degree, significantly increases a person’s likelihood of professional success compared to those that only receive a high school diploma, or less. The importance of a college degree in the workforce is the highest it has ever been (APLU 2021).

Education continues to be one of the biggest avenues for people to break out of the poverty cycle (Sahay et. Al. 2016). The job prospects and access significantly expand with a college degree. Despite the overwhelming importance of it, the disparity in higher education access is, unsurprisingly, inequitable. There are many barriers to higher education that students from immigrant and marginalized backgrounds can face. This includes everything from affording SAT prep for college applications, to even the language (in)accessibility that students can experience during the application process.

Meritocracy for who?

However, access to education goes beyond filling out the right documents. Simply getting students to the classroom can be inequitable in and of itself when undocumented students, especially those in border towns, are limited to the institutions in their area, rather than the institutions they get accepted into.

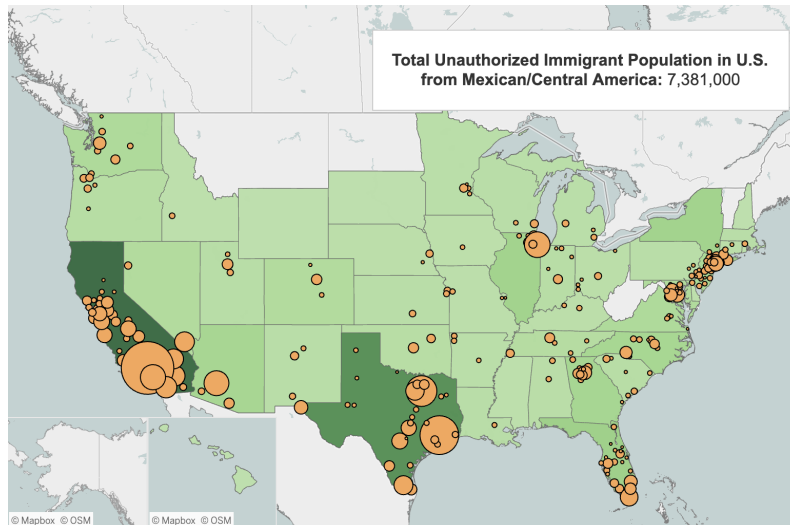


Figure 5: Map of U.S. unauthorized immigrants from Mexico and Central America in 2019. Source: “Unauthorized Immigrant Populations by Country and Region, Top States and Counties of Residence, 2019,” n.d <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/programs/data-hub/charts/unauthorized-immigrant-populations-country-and-region-top-state-and-county>

There are large clusters of undocumented immigrants across the U.S., mainly congregated in major cities. Thinking back to the map with immigration checkpoints in figure 4, a portion of clusters are concentrated in border towns that are susceptible to additional immigration enforcements. Below is a map of the top 100 higher educational institutions in the U.S.

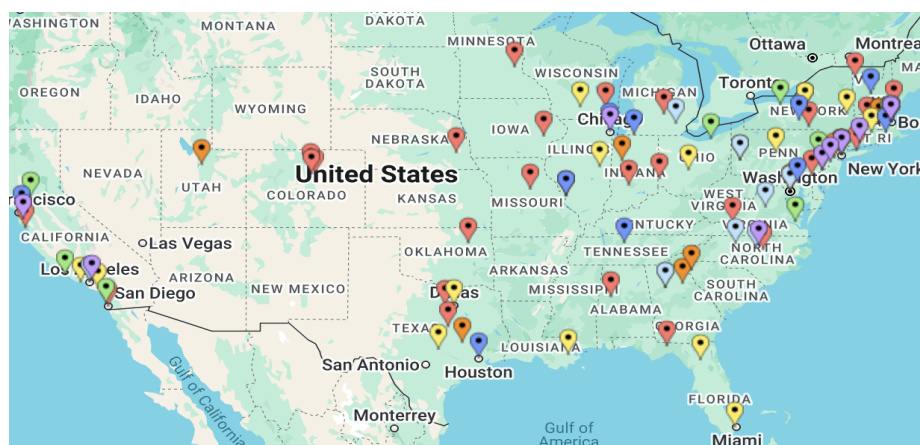


Figure 6: Map of the top 100 ranked universities in the U.S. Source: DuVander, Adam. “Map of Top Colleges in the US.” BatchGeo Blog, August 15, 2015. <https://blog.batchgeo.com/map-of-top-colleges-in-the-us/>.

‘There’s quality universities outside of the top 100, what’s the big deal?’ Hundreds of thousands of students residing in those orange circles will not be able to attend a top university regardless of their intelligence and merit. Only two top-tier universities fall within regions with fixed internal immigration checkpoints, both in California. This means that students in border towns in Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas (including Emily), have no way of getting to these top institutions. Despite Emily’s sacrifices, a piece of legislation stands in her way. “I mean, I beat out thousands of applicants, and I’m not able to go to school because of the Real ID Act, and it’s just like, absolutely ridiculous to me. Honestly, I think it’s very angering,” she laments, frustration thick in her voice.

Students should have a right to attend the universities they earn acceptances to. As early as 1970, researchers acknowledged that “A student [may] find it necessary to migrate in order to obtain an education at a top grade liberal arts school” (Tuckman 1970, 185). The benefits of elite private schools are oftentimes unmatched, in comparison to the resources offered at community colleges, or even large public schools. These private institutions boast smaller class sizes, and expansive resources such as academic and career advisors, with a smaller student to advisor ratio. Not to mention, the networking and post-graduation benefits that students receive at elite institutions are significantly better and provide more job access (Martin 2009). Yet, for undocumented students in these regions, these advantages remain out of reach because of systemic barriers that trap them in invisible borders within the country.

Getting an acceptance is half the battle; affording it is a whole other issue. This can mean something entirely more for students that come from immigrant backgrounds, like Emily and

Laura, many of whom are the first in their family to go to college—especially considering the intersection of poverty with people from undocumented backgrounds (Williams 2015). Emily and Laura are both from low-income communities, relying on full ride scholarships to attend school. Laura filled out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) to apply for a need-based scholarship. Emily, however, was ineligible to apply since the form requires a Social Security number. Instead, she had to rely on school-specific financial aid forms—where elite private institutions are known to offer significantly more support than public universities. But all the elite private institutions are past the checkpoint. A college degree for her went beyond attaining a milestone that her mom didn't have—it was a way out of a generational cycle.

In 1982, the Supreme Court ruling on *Plyler v. Doe* ensured that all children, regardless of immigration status, have access to a public k-12 education (Thomas et al. 2005). That protection vanishes upon adulthood. Turning 18 marks a drastic shift as undocumented youth lose further legal safeguards and encounter significant barriers to higher education. Notably, the ruling on *Plyler v. Doe*, also does not protect an undocumented person's right to work.

Access to well-paying jobs looks a little complicated for undocumented people. Most employers require a Social Security number, which most undocumented individuals cannot legally obtain. This leaves them with limited options in the informal economy, or in jobs that are more lenient on falsified documents (Williams 2015). Coupled with the inaccessibility of higher education which further restricts career opportunities.

Furthermore, the U.S. is credential oriented, under which people depend on the credentials they build up for their signaling power to employers (Harris 2024). A degree from a prestigious university is not just about education. It serves as a gateway to competitive job markets, professional networks and economic mobility. Undocumented students are often unable

to access these institutions, shutting them out of spaces that could lead to upward mobility.

Without the ability to attend these institutions, undocumented students are systemically stuck in a reinforced cycle of exclusion.

Opportunities like these are what students like Emily have spent their entire lives working towards. Only to get shut out at the finish line. For over 12 years, she poured everything into her education. When she earned her place at a top university, it was a promise out of poverty for her and her mother. She understands the stakes all too well, “I knew that as an immigrant, as a non-citizen, I had to work 10 times harder in order to achieve some sort of financial stability, social stability in this life if I wanted to live here.” For her, access to education was about survival. But the system that promised her mobility, is the same one that locks her out.

However, as we’ve seen, this isn’t a burden shouldered by undocumented students alone. Their families are impacted by this as well.

Alone from Move-in to Graduation

Beyond legal restrictions, the undocumented experience culminates into deep social exclusion. More than being barred from institutional opportunities, it deprives people of social liberties and human experiences (Williams 2015). The weight of exclusion stretches past legal barriers. Laura, whose family is undocumented, recalls her move-in experience with teary eyes:

I was terrified... it was the first time that I left my home for anything. During the actual process of moving in, I was so stressed out about getting to the right place... I only had two suitcases. So I didn’t have a lot of clothes, I didn't have a lot of school supplies. I didn’t have bedding either. Just because we couldn’t afford the extra suitcases, and since I was by myself, no one else could help me haul them from the airport.

So, Laura arrived alone. With only what she could carry. While other students unpacked and decorated with their families by their side, Laura had to settle for a facetime instead. Move-in day is not even the last event Laura anticipates being alone in. Despite her upcoming graduation in May, her family cannot be in attendance because they cannot risk getting detained at the border checkpoint. Her college experience started and ended in a very similar way: alone.

Policies like the Real ID Act and internal checkpoints don't just restrict movement, they fracture human experiences. The weight of poverty, immigration status, and discrimination converge, creating barriers beyond the classroom. As Williams explains, "constraints associated with poverty and discrimination based on ethnicity and immigration status intermix as a result of their particular position as 'illegal'" (Williams 2015). Moments of joy and belonging, like graduation, turn into stark reminders of exclusion. The restrictions create an ongoing sense of isolation, woven into the fabric of daily life. Additionally, the issue is severely underreported. It is difficult to measure the magnitude of how many people are affected by these repercussions because of the risk of surveillance that makes people less likely to report their experiences.

Conclusion

The Real ID Act was not the first restriction that undocumented people faced, but it is part of a larger system that impedes people's rights and mobility. The Real ID Act enforces an increasingly controlling level of surveillance on people residing in the U.S., and undocumented people bear the brunt of its consequences. Whether that is forcing a top student's hand at transferring schools because the risk isn't worth it or creating an extremely isolating experience even for students lawfully residing in the U.S., the Real ID Act creates a clear idea of what undocumented people are allowed to do and where they are allowed to go.

Beyond important life milestones, undocumented people should have the right to freely move or travel, on the basis that they are people that deserve human experiences. The enforcement of the Real ID Act reaffirms to undocumented people that their choices, experiences, and movement is at the mercy of policies made by legislators they can't even vote for.

For now, it's Real IDs for air travel. But the direction of further restrictions is still uncertain. What is certain though, is that the policy decisions will always get to dictate the extent to which undocumented people have freedom. Through the surveillance and control of movement, access and opportunity, the system's message is clear: undocumented people are only permitted to exist within carefully drawn boundaries.

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