

Episode_120__Growing_Up_Undocumented.mp3

Avi Green [00:00:08] What's it like to have a secret? What does it mean if there's something about you, something secret which if the wrong people knew it could get you in a ton of trouble? What if it might mean losing your job or getting picked up by the authorities and detained? And what if your secret meant you might have no right to an attorney? What if you might even get banished from the United States, sent away with no right to apply to come back? Not for years, maybe never. That's part of what it can mean to live as an undocumented immigrant in the United States. There are more than 11 million undocumented immigrants living in the US today. Of them, more than three and a half million are so-called DREAMers -- young people who arrived in the United States as teens, children, or even babies. Of course, you know these statistics and you know the white-hot politics of immigration. But what is life actually like for some of the young people in this huge group? That's what we'll find out today during the first episode of No Jargon's 3-part mini-series on undocumented immigration in the United States. As the immigration debate rages in Washington, we'll take a look at what research can tell us about undocumented immigrants, their stories, their impact on the nation, and the ways America's laws are shaping their lives. Hi, I'm Avi Green and this is the Scholars Strategy Network's No Jargon. Each week, we discuss an American policy problem with one of the nation's top researchers without jargon. This week I spoke to Roberto Gonzales. He's a professor of education in the Graduate School of Education at Harvard University and he's the author of a book, *Lives in Limbo: Undocumented and Coming of Age in America*. Here's our conversation. Roberto Gonzales, thank you so much for coming on No Jargon.

Roberto Gonzales [00:02:06] Yeah. Thanks Avi for having me.

Avi Green [00:02:09] So from 2003 on, you have been talking with undocumented youth to learn about their lives and to protect their identities in your book you changed their names. One passage that really affected me was about a young person who you called Misto who came to talk with you when he was deeply upset. Can you tell me about him and what happened?

Roberto Gonzales [00:02:33] So Misto had been saving money and I met him in the context of he was in community college and he wanted to transfer to a four-year university. And he'd been saving money and saved about four thousand dollars for tuition and books to a Cal State University, close by his home and what had happened to him was that his father, who was a truck driver, his father had obtained a driver's license in California many years before, when undocumented immigrants were eligible for driver's licenses. And so he'd use an expired driver's license for many years. And there was a traffic situation and his co-worker who was in the passenger of his car got into an altercation with another driver on the road. So long story short, the police are called and Misto's father is arrested. He's driving with an expired license. He couldn't produce any other identification. And in the conversation, the police officer realized that he was undocumented. He ultimately gets placed in deportation proceedings and is promptly deported back to Mexico. And so for Misto's family, this meant that their breadwinner -- their primary breadwinner was out of the country and out of work. But moreover, that Misto's father that is, his mother's husband was gone and they -- they needed him back. And so Misto ended up giving his uncle the four thousand dollars that he saved to bring his father back to the United States, back to California from Mexico. And Misto didn't hesitate to do this. This was -- this was his father. This was his family. This was his obligation to his family. But nevertheless, it put him in a hole and his dream that he's worked really hard for, to go to college, to go to

attend a four year college was again put on hold. He had become accustomed to this. In his life, you know, many things that he wanted had been -- he had to -- had to wait for.

Avi Green [00:04:46] So the name of your book is Lives in Limbo and Misto is not the only person who you study, not the only young person you study. What are the themes that connect the hundred and fifty young people who you studied?

Roberto Gonzales [00:05:00] You know, I studied these young people for 12 years and so I was be able to kind of keep track of their lives over a significant period of time. And in the book, I argue that their status being undocumented is a kind of master status. And so that's an old sociological term that basically refers to a particular trait or aspect of their lives that dominates or overwhelms all others. So it's a binding constraint, a lead weight I guess, if you will, that for all of the young people that I met no matter what initial advantages they may have had, no matter how quickly they got out of the gate, no matter how unaccented their English was, here was this lead weight, their status that ultimately brought them down. Then I think that what's remarkable about this is that this is a group of immigrants that very early on in their lives from day one in the United States, they are integrated into the public school system. They are legally entitled to to attend K through 12 public schools.

Avi Green [00:06:13] Right, right. So you know one thing that I wanted to mention that you talked about in your book is that at first, there is a little bit of melting in the pot. There is this one thing that most undocumented immigrants got that lots of your 150 immigrants got which is you know, at the beginning of K-12 education, they're in there with all the other kids. And then there's this process where they kind of begin to become aware that what's available for other kids is not going to be available for them.

Roberto Gonzales [00:06:47] Yeah, that's right. So for most aspects of childhood, their immigration status is inconsequential. So they grow up to lie alongside of American-born peers and friends. They grow up to a daily Pledge of Allegiance. They participate in sports and other -- other clubs, activities alongside their peers. But at around 15, 16, 17 years old as a -- a kind of a world of independence is opening up to their peers, as -- as their friends are taking after-school jobs, obtaining driver's licenses, thinking about college -- all of these really important and defining rites of passage are then closed off to them and so they see or they experience really for the first time, the limits of their belonging, what becomes a kind of growing number of exclusions in their lives that become really part of -- part of late adolescence and early adulthood for them.

Avi Green [00:07:48] Right. So Professor Gonzalez, you wrote about basically two groups roughly of young people. There was a way that you categorize them: college-goers and early exiters. Tell me about that.

Roberto Gonzales [00:08:02] I was really inspired by Paul Willis' book, Learning to Labor, and this is a kind of classic ethnography from the 1970s, and he similarly followed a group of high-achieving young people and another group of more kind of modestly achieving and so I was really interested to understand the pathways of young people who had been successful in school and I call them college-goers and the college-goers at my study had at least two years of college education and then I -- I contrasted their experiences with a group that I call early exiters and these early exiters were young people who left the education system at or before their high school graduation.

Avi Green [00:08:51] So what happened to the early exiters? How did they get pushed out or left out of the end of high school and college?

Roberto Gonzales [00:09:02] So for many of these young people, their school experiences were kind of powerful pushing out for them, if you will. Many of them, contrasting their experiences to the college-goers, were not in AP classes, International Baccalaureate honors classes, other kind of specialized programs in very large high schools. So that the student to counselor ratio in California is about 950 to one. And so --

Avi Green [00:09:34] For guidance -- students to guidance counselors.

Roberto Gonzales [00:09:36] Yeah, that's right. And so, for young people who don't have the, I think the luxury of being in these kind of smaller specialized programs, they end up in really large classes and many of them don't speak to a guidance counselor till late in their junior year, early on in their senior year. So we have all of these issues that we've been discussing, these exclusions and I think the psychological effects of these exclusions, you know, seeing their friends move forward while you know for the first time in their lives, they -- they had no option. They were hitting a wall, like running into a wall. And so for many of them, you know, not having decent school options, not having somebody to talk to and also having pressures from their families to -- to help out, to go to work, and -- and to contribute meaningfully, many of them ended up drifting. Drifting out of school and then by 16, 17 years old, starting to take jobs in an informal labor -- labor market.

Avi Green [00:10:48] What about the college-goers? I mean, Professor Gonzalez, without having researched their lives myself, I would have guessed that these would be the young people who would have come from families, first of all, with more income and more assets and less debt than the early exiters. Was that the case in your -- in your group?

Roberto Gonzales [00:11:06] So I think that some of the college-goers had parents who had higher levels of education but certainly not all and not the majority. The key for most of them was a relationship or a decision made by teachers or school -- school officials early on in their lives that put them on a track to to be successful in school.

Avi Green [00:11:34] It wasn't necessarily about their families having a little more money.

Roberto Gonzales [00:11:38] It wasn't. And most of the -- most of my respondents were very low income. But really what -- what drove this was relationships and so being in -- getting into better classes and the better programs in school as early as kind of late elementary school, early middle school, when many of these decisions are made, for these early exiters, it made a huge difference.

Avi Green [00:12:07] Can you tell me a story about one of your youth?

Roberto Gonzales [00:12:10] So take a young young woman named Esperanza and the pseudonym that I give her, Esperanza in Spanish meaning hope, is not without irony. She was one of these -- these college-goers and she did very well in school. She had close friends and peers in her honors class -- honors and AP classes and they encouraged each other. They pushed each other. She could count upwards of four or five mentors, close mentors in school that encouraged her to do well and for her, that meant a world of difference. When she started experiencing these barriers because of her status, she had caring adults in her lives -- in her life that she was able to -- to approach and say, You know, look. I'm -- I'm dealing with all of these issues. I just found out that because I'm

undocumented, I can't get financial aid for college and I really want to go." And in her case, she had teachers who -- who went to the teachers lounge and passed around the proverbial hat and came up with enough money to pay for a semester tuition for her. And so these kinds of opportunities through really structured relationships I think, made a -- made a huge difference for many of the college-goers.

Avi Green [00:13:30] Can you tell me about the experience of one of the college-goers once he or she got to college?

Roberto Gonzales [00:13:36] I will continue with Esperanza. She started at the university, at a University of California campus and she started in 2002, right after the state passed a in-state tuition bill.

Avi Green [00:13:48] Right, and just technically that's a bill that allows undocumented immigrants who live in the state to pay the same as everybody else who lives in the state as opposed to paying the out-of-state tuition which would be significantly higher.

Roberto Gonzales [00:14:00] That's correct and without the ability to pay in-state tuition, most of these young people could not attend college because they're excluded from federal financial aid. So Esperanza gets to college. She's very excited. She feels as though this -- -- the in-state tuition bill in California was a -- was a real blessing for her but she tried to move through college without driving, so without driving -- without a driver's license and working only minimally.

Avi Green [00:14:30] Right, because she couldn't -- she couldn't legally work or she might get, you mentioned for example, people would pick up a job but then if they're working there's a form of exposure where at some point, the employer might do a Social Security database check and then you get suddenly fired.

Roberto Gonzales [00:14:47] Yeah, that's right. And so she really wanted to play it safe. She didn't want to drive without a driver's license and she didn't want to work illegally. She wanted to protect herself as much as she could. But over the years in college, she realized that her calculations each year were off with rising tuition costs. She realized that she had to she had to work more. And gradually she -- she put herself deeper and deeper in debt to where she had to withdraw from school for about a year so that she could save money to catch up in her tuition. And so whereas she -- she started very excited, by the end of her several years in college, she had become very isolated and very frustrated and very discouraged.

Avi Green [00:15:41] How does Esperanza's story relate to the general group of college-goers that you observed? Were their overall prospects in the long run a lot better than the early exiters?

Roberto Gonzales [00:15:54] This is a key point here, that the -- we look at the college-goers and the early exiters at about 18, 19 years old and their pathways diverge considerably. Young college-goers are able to make that transition from high school to college, to continue to keep their hopes up and continue to dream and to aspire on beautiful college campuses with high-achieving peers where early exiters at 16, 17, 18, 19 years old already have a lot of experience in low-wage jobs. They're working in restaurants. They're cleaning hotel rooms. They're doing landscaping work. But over time, as these young people moved into their mid-twenties, college-goers ran out of available education. Many of those that I interviewed ultimately obtained bachelor's degrees and

more than a dozen of them had gone on to post-baccalaureate degrees, but their status had not changed and our laws had not changed. And so, they find themselves out of school and with the very same narrow range of options as the early exiters for work. And so, these are young adults now, who want to be able to lead the lives of young adults, want to be able to have some independence, want to be able to date, want to be able to buy clothes for themselves and so they move into the workforce and not in hospitals, not in architectural firms, but rather they join other low-wage workers in the low-wage service economy.

Avi Green [00:17:42] In other words, they've gotten this degree. They've earned it. But in many ways they can't -- they often can't use it for the kind of higher paying jobs that you would think would go with a college degree.

Roberto Gonzales [00:17:52] Yeah that's right and so by their mid-20s, their mid to late 20s, they look in terms of their employment possibilities and their trajectories. They look a lot like early exiters and a lot like their parents.

Avi Green [00:18:09] Professor Gonzalez, in reading your book, as a non expert I was surprised that you mentioned several times a series of changes to immigration law that happened in the 1990s that had really big impacts. Can you talk about some of those changes and what they did?

Roberto Gonzales [00:18:25] Yeah. So under the Clinton administration, 96 laws that included welfare reform, there were a number of immigration measures that really I think sowed the seeds for the kind of massive enforcement and the difficulties undocumented immigrants face in this country. And a couple of those, I think are noteworthy. One, the Immigration and Nationality Act had a provision called 245-I that allowed undocumented immigrants to adjust their status in the United States. When 245 was eliminated it meant that undocumented immigrants had to go back to their countries of origin to try to adjust their status. Alongside the elimination of 245-I is that the United States also put into place mandatory bars to admission. So for example, if one had been in the country for 180 days or less would face five years -- mandatory five years before she or he could even apply to come to the U.S. A year would be a 10 year bar.

Avi Green [00:19:39] In other words, if you've been in the country in an illegal status for a year then when -- then you would be barred from coming back for 10.

Roberto Gonzales [00:19:49] Yeah. You'd have to wait 10 years before you could --.

Avi Green [00:19:51] Even apply.

Roberto Gonzales [00:19:52] Yeah, that's correct. And these bars would be triggered upon departure from the United States. So that means that somebody, upon leaving then you would get these bars kind of slapped onto you. So if we think about that, what happened as a result is that people didn't leave. People didn't want to leave because in order to adjust their status, they would then have to be -- they would then incur these bars. And so what we saw from, really from the late 1980s through about 2007 or so, is that the population of undocumented immigrants in this country grew from a little under 2 million to about 12.7 million at its height. So it grew more than sixfold in a matter of about 20 years.

Avi Green [00:20:52] So Roberto Gonzalez, since the -- since the George W. Bush years at least, presidents and Congresses have made pronouncements about the need for a

new immigration law. But the latest negotiations in the Trump administration with Congress seem now to be focused on the smallest possible deal. Some sort of legalization for some number of DREAMers that is for some number of immigrants who -- undocumented immigrants who arrived in the United States as youths in return for Trump's wall at the Mexican border and more immigration enforcement, maybe reductions in illegal immigration. In its most recent negotiation, actually Trump refused more or less that exact deal. But would a deal or a deal like it really unlock the American dream for for the DREAMers?

Roberto Gonzales [00:21:48] Well, this is a real double-edged sword for them because a deal that would provide them some sort of relief and some sort of pathway to legalization. And by them, I mean a very small slice between 800,000 and maybe upwards of two million but it would come at the cost of massive enforcement and other other measures that would make life even more difficult for their parents and their their other family members. And so that's a choice that for many of them really don't want to make. They don't see their liberation at the cost of their parents continued oppression as something as a as a deal that they thought they could go for.

[00:22:40] Professor Roberto Gonzalez thank you so much for coming on NEW jargon.

[00:22:43] Thank you for having me.

[00:22:45] And thanks for listening. The scholars Strategy Network is a nationwide network of nearly 1000 researchers in 46 states working to improve public policy and strengthen democracy. For more on what you heard on this week's episode and more of Roberto Gonzalez's work you can check out our show notes at scholars dot org slash no jargon. The producers of our show are Shira ASCO and Dominic Dumont and our sound engineer is jam bys. If you enjoy the show please give us a five star review on Apple podcasts or wherever you get your podcasts. And if you have ideas for more episodes or feedback send it to me on Twitter. Find us at at no jargon podcast or email us no jargon at scholars dot org. See you next week.