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Building Bridges in a Sanctuary City: Pan-ethnic Identity Among Precarious Latino Immigrants

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Abstract

This article examines the strategies developed at the local level to strengthen pan-ethnic solidarity within Latino communities in the San Francisco Bay Area. It explores how local organizations and migrant communities may foster a pan-ethnic identity and the subsequent effects on the inclusion process of Latino immigrants with precarious legal status. Based on 87 in-depth interviews, this study offers a novel perspective on integration by focusing on intra-ethnic dynamics within Latino communities, particularly at the local level, rather than broader inter-ethnic or national contexts. The findings highlight the critical role of local contexts in shaping the mechanisms of inclusion for Latino immigrants, revealing the complexities of identity formation under conditions of legal precarity. In particular, they show how in exclusionary contexts, within-group solidarity can be built. This research contributes to broader sociological and political debates on immigrant inclusion, pan-ethnic identity formation, and the influence of local environments in these processes.

Keywords Immigration · Latinos · USA · Integration · Local authorities · San Francisco · DACA

Introduction

The presence of migrants with precarious legal status—thereafter referred to as "precarious migrants" and defined as individuals who either lack regular legal status or are vulnerable to the loss of their legal status (Homberger et al., 2022)—has become a public issue in the USA, and it is now considered an entrenched feature of its society (Bloch & Chimienti, 2011; De Genova, 2002; Sassen, 1999). According to the latest estimates, there are between 10.5 and 11 million undocumented migrants in

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the country (Kolker, 2022; MPI, 2019; Lopez et al., 2021). The growing presence of precarious migrants has been accompanied by changing migration policies, which have become increasingly differentiated towards specific groups and particularly restrictive towards precarious migrants (de Haas et al., 2018). It has been marked by a growing trend to criminalize irregularity, which has produced a climate of hostility towards these migrants (Vázquez, 2015; Menjívar et al., 2018; Chauvin & Garcés-Mascareñas, 2012). Although the legal framework for many punitive immigration policies was established in the 1990s, the 9/11 attacks acted as a catalyst, intensifying the mobilization of resources linked to these policies (Macías-Rojas, 2018). This trend, coined "crimmigration" (Vázquez, 2015; Stumpf, 2006; Menjívar et al., 2018), saw a steady convergence between the criminal justice and immigration control systems, notably with the enactment of the USA PATRIOT Act (Kanstroom, 2004). In this context, immigration surveillance mechanisms have been significantly expanded, with a particular focus on Latin American immigrants (Moinester, 2024). The delegitimation of precarious migrants, particularly those from Latin America, who are portrayed as non-deserving individuals, served as a justification for the implementation of restrictive policies that dramatically reduced their access to basic services and worker protections, thereby making them more vulnerable to exploitation.[1]

Despite the increasingly hostile national climate, not all states and cities within the USA responded to precarious migrants in the same way. California, in particular, stands out as a state that has implemented more inclusive policies, providing a comparatively favorable environment for precarious immigrants.[2] California has the largest Latino population in the country—about 15 million—and the largest number of undocumented immigrants with 2.7 million individuals and DACA recipients[3]—28% of all DACA recipients (Lopez et al., 2021; MPI, 2022). Most of these precarious migrants (79%) originate from Latin America, particularly from Mexico

[1] For instance, undocumented migrants were officially barred from receiving non-emergency healthcare by the 1996 Personal Responsibility Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (Viladrich, 2012). More recently, the Inadmissibility on Public Charge Grounds further deterred migrants from accessing social benefits by enabling the federal government to refuse to regularize the legal status of immigrants already on American soil if they have previously accessed, or are deemed likely to rely in future on, certain public benefits (USCIS 2018). While this Public Charge Rule was subsequently rescinded (Kruzel, 2021), it is likely to have produced lasting "chilling effects" on access to services (Batalova et al., 2018), thereby evidencing how national policies may define the limits of inclusion for precarious migrants.

[2] In 2010, Arizona passed the "Support Our Law Enforcement and Safe Neighborhoods Act," also known as SB 1070, which made it a state crime to be in the country without proper documentation. The law also allowed police officers to ask for proof of legal status during lawful stops and arrests. The law was widely criticized as promoting racial profiling and was later partially struck down by the US Supreme Court in Arizona v. United States (2012), only upholding the provision requiring to check the immigration status of individuals during law enforcement stops. Similarly, in 2011, Alabama passed the "Beason-Hammon Alabama Taxpayer and Citizen Protection Act," also known as HB 56, which made it a crime to knowingly rent to or hire an undocumented immigrant. The law also required public schools to verify the immigration status of students and their parents and made it a crime to do business with the state government without proper documentation. The law was also criticized as promoting racial profiling and was later struck down by a federal court.

[3] DACA, or Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, is a US immigration policy that was introduced in June 2012 under President Barack Obama's administration. It allows certain individuals who were brought to the United States without documents as children to receive a renewable 2-year period of deferred action from deportation and become eligible for a work permit.

(61%), El Salvador (7%), and Guatemala (6%) (MPI, 2019). As a Sanctuary State, state and local law enforcement are restricted from cooperating with federal immigration authorities, except in certain circumstances (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2020), and the state has also taken number of steps to support undocumented migrants, such as allowing them to obtain driver's licenses (Enriquez et al., 2019), to receive access to some state-funded healthcare services such as emergency services and pregnancy-related care (Torres-Pinzon et al., 2020) or in-state tuition rates for public colleges and universities (Bjorklund, 2018; Colvin, 2010).[4] This context makes it a particularly relevant place to analyze the inclusion process of undocumented Latino immigrants and how the local context might shape the lived experiences of precarious migrants. In particular, the San Francisco Bay area (SFBA),[5] where this research was conducted, is also one of the areas that has one of the most favorable policies and practices towards precarious migrants. Its core cities such as Oakland, San Francisco, San Jose, and Berkeley are sanctuary cities (see p. 4). Indeed, San Francisco pioneered a broader international trend towards the increased inclusion of undocumented migrants (Lambert & Swerts, 2019), which led to growing recognition by scholars that national policies need to be informed by what is happening at the local level (Spencer, 2018). Yet, despite this recognition, there is limited research on the development of ethnic solidarity and belonging at the local level, as well as the strategies implemented to promote inclusion among precarious Latino migrants. One particular avenue of research worth exploring is an analysis of the development of pan-ethnic solidarity among the Latino communities.[6]

In the next section, we review the literature on pan-ethnic solidarity and belonging among Latino communities. The "Methodology" section outlines the research approach, followed by the findings on the role of local organizations in fostering solidarity. The "Conclusion" section discusses the broader implications for the inclusion of precarious Latino immigrants in sanctuary cities.

Literature Review

Feelings of Belonging, Ethnic Identity, and Pan-ethnic Solidarity

Pan-ethnic solidarity—or its lack thereof—is important for it shapes perceptions of belonging. Pan-ethnicity refers to a collective identity formed by individuals from various Latino subgroups who share some common cultural, historical, and

[4] While these protections exist at the state level, there are nonetheless some rural areas within California where social and political attitudes may mirror the conservatism found in other parts of the United States, potentially affecting the lived experiences of undocumented immigrants in those regions.

[5] It is comprised of the following nine counties: Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin, Napa, San Mateo, Santa Clara, Solano, Sonoma, and San Francisco.

[6] The concept of "Latino" refers to a diverse and multifaceted ethnic category encompassing individuals of Latin American origin or descent. It is a term used to describe people who come from, or whose ancestors came from, countries in Latin America, including South America, Central America, Mexico, and the Spanish-speaking nations of the Caribbean. As part of this research, we focus on immigrants who self-identified as Latino.

social experiences (Mallet, 2014; Tran, 2008). This identity is not solely defined by language or religion but by a broader sense of shared belonging and mutual support among diverse Latino groups. While immigrant solidarity emphasizes collective action, shared experiences, and mutual support, the sense of belonging focuses more on the individual's connection, acceptance, and inclusion within a community (Menjívar, 2000). The construction of a pan-ethnic identity under the "Latino" and "Hispanic" has been reinforced by various societal forces. The marketing and media industries, as described by Mora (2014), have played a foundational role in creating and perpetuating this identity. These industries have fostered a sense of shared experience among Latinos by emphasizing common cultural elements such as language, traditions, and values, which are then disseminated through Spanish-language media and consumer goods. Similarly, the segmented labor markets have reinforced this identity by clustering Latinos into specific sectors, often low-wage and service-oriented, which further cements a shared socio-economic experience. Moreover, as Rosa (2019) highlights, the racialization of language and the associated identity politics add another layer to this pan-ethnic identity. The constant negotiation of identity through language, where speaking Spanish or exhibiting certain linguistic traits can be both a source of pride and a point of contention, contributes to both the solidarity and division within the Latino community (Tran, 2008). The emergence of this pan-ethnic Latino identity has had significant political and social implications. Voting blocs and lobbying groups have harnessed this identity to build political power, advocating for policies that address the specific needs and concerns of the Latino community. The creation of this seemingly unified identity has further allowed for greater political representation and the ability to influence national discourse on issues such as immigration, education, and labor rights (Cuevas-Molina & Nteta, 2023).

This, in turn, has influenced perceptions of belonging, which are also a key aspect of solidarity building as well as social and political stability (Pérez & Hetherington, 2014). The concepts of belonging and identity—which are sometimes used interchangeably to capture the subjective sense of being part of a social group are closely linked to the context of reception and the social environment, in particular, the different forms of exclusion often embedded within this space (Mallet-Garcia & Garcia-Bedolla, 2021; Amit & Bar-Lev, 2015). In recent years, the complexity of belonging has received increasing attention (Phinney & Ong, 2007). Ethnic identity, defined as "a subset of identity categories in which eligibility for membership is determined by attributes associated with, or believed to be associated with, descent," has been used as an indicator of the integration of immigrant populations (Chandra, 2006), as it is shaped in response to encounters with ethnic boundaries and evolves in response to social and political contexts (Omi and Winant, 2014). For instance, Ono (2002) found that subsequent generations of Mexican individuals are less likely to identify as Mexican but that perceived experiences of discrimination or darker skin color increase their identification as "Mexican." Indeed, ethnic identity can buffer or exacerbate the effects of discrimination: in line with this, Portes and Rumbaut (2001) define the concept of "reactive ethnicity" as a "process in which perceived threats or exclusion lead to

a rise in ethnic attachments." In this case, immigrants integrate into different segments of US society, depending on what is available to them (Yip et al., 2008). The concept of "reactive ethnicity" has recently been used to explore the effect of hostile contexts and discrimination on integration outcomes (Auer & Fossati, 2019). While a welcoming environment fosters higher levels of feelings of belonging, a more hostile environment decreases the sense of belonging: Latino immigrants who experience discrimination are less likely to identify as American (Golash-Boza, 2006). This may also be the case for native-born Latinos who are often still considered foreigners who must earn their place in society (Huynh, 2012).

While the literature has focused on inter-group contact, showing that it increases identification with a distinctive in-group (Tajfel & Turner, 2004; Telles & Ortiz, 2008), the role of intra-group interactions on the development of a pan-ethnic identity has been less researched. Some studies have pointed to the increased risk of facing discrimination from co-ethnic groups in the labor market and the importance of co-ethnic solidarity (Morales, 2011), while others have emphasized the role of limited resources and economic hardship as a reason behind the lack of solidarity that may exist among Latinos, and highlighting the influence of a shared anti-Latina/Latino sentiment in the U.S. to build cohesion among the Latino communities (Osuna, 2015). This paper fills a gap in the literature by focusing on intra-ethnic relations to analyze the mechanisms at play, at the local level, in the inclusion processes of precarious Latino migrants and how solidarity may develop. Indeed, recent research has emphasized the importance of solidarity- and community-based efforts to support precarious Latino immigrants and promote their inclusion in US society (Cordero-Guzmán, 2005).

Scholars have highlighted the role of grassroots organizations, immigrant rights campaigns, and community-based initiatives in building political power and advocating for policies that benefit precarious immigrants (Nicholls et al., 2021; Vasquez Guzman et al., 2020; Sanchez et al., 2019, Benavides, et al., 2021). For instance, United We Dream (UWD), an immigrant youth-led organization in the U.S., organized a series of high-profile campaigns including the "Right to Dream" campaign, where undocumented youth publicly "came out" as undocumented, risking deportation to raise awareness about their plight. These efforts contributed to the establishment of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program by the Obama administration. In California, the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights (CHIRLA) has been key in shaping immigration policy in the state: they launched a sustained campaign to pass AB 60, which allowed undocumented immigrants in California to obtain driver's licenses.

These efforts can help to foster a sense of community and collective identity among precarious Latino immigrants, reducing the likelihood of intra-ethnic tensions and promoting greater social and economic inclusion. Some studies have highlighted the importance of social networks and shared experiences in promoting positive intra-ethnic relations, developing a pan-ethnic identity, and reducing prejudice towards precarious Latino immigrants (Sanchez & Masuoka, 2010; Negi et al., 2013). Finally, recent studies have further shown how immigrants—including undocumented Latinos—have achieved policy successes utilizing nonprofits as their institutional

platform. These accomplishments include for instance the implementation of municipal identity cards, language access policies, and an increase in the minimum wage. De Graauw's (2017) research shows the interconnectedness of immigrant organizations and local government officials, highlighting their collaborative efforts to address beneficial issues for precarious immigrants. It emphasizes the significance of public–private partnerships between the city government and immigrant organizations in San Francisco, as they play a crucial role in enabling immigrants to fully experience socio-economic and political inclusion (De Graauw, 2017).

This paper focuses on intra-group relations to investigate how precarious Latino immigrants' sense of belonging is shaped by the local context, as it is crucial to understand the factors that contribute to influencing identity formation and their implications for the inclusion and well-being of precarious Latino immigrants.

Inclusion Process for Precarious Latino Immigrants

While developing a sense of belonging for documented Latinos might prove a complex process, for precarious Latino immigrants, developing a sense of belonging is further challenged by their lack of secure legal status (Browne & Odem, 2012; Mallet et al., 2017). Some studies suggest that some may internalize their vulnerability, leading to a lower perception of belonging, while others manage to develop a stronger sense of belonging by redefining their place within American society (Chavez-Pringle et al., 2014). This complexity is particularly pronounced among the 1.5 generation, who grew up in the U.S. but lack legal documentation (Abrego, 2011; Gonzales & Burciaga, 2018). Despite feeling American in many ways, they are held back by their legal status. Research on the impact of the DACA program further indicates that for its recipients, being granted a temporary reprieve from deportation was correlated with higher levels of belonging as obtaining lawful presence reinforces their connection to American society (Gonzales, 2016) (Siemons, et al., 2017). However, the prospect of ending the program, which highlighted the precarious aspect of this temporary reprieve from deportation, has also been found to contribute to decreased feeling of belonging for DACA recipients (Mallet-Garcia & Garcia-Bedolla, 2021).

Studies have also showed that there are significant challenges to the inclusion of precarious Latino immigrants that may stem from their own community, highlighting the importance of intersectional factors such as legal status, gender, race, and nationality in shaping experiences of discrimination among precarious Latino immigrants (Bastick & Mallet-Garcia, 2022; Renfroe, 2018). Indeed, precarious Latino immigrants may experience discrimination and prejudice from their own community, which can lead to social and economic exclusion (Carey et al., 2013; Castillo, 2009). The presence of undocumented individuals creates divisions within communities, particularly between those who are documented and those who are not. These divisions can lead to tensions, as documented Latinos may feel pressure to distance themselves from their undocumented counterparts to avoid being associated with "illegality." Conversely, undocumented individuals may experience feelings of exclusion and marginalization within their own communities, further exacerbating

these tensions (De Genova, 2013). Other studies have showed how different segments of the Latino electorate, particularly more conservative or established Latinos, may hold anti-undocumented views, which influence their political behavior and policy preferences (Abrajano & Alvarez, 2010, Ochoa, 2004; Chavez, 2008; Zepeda-Millán & Wallace, 2018).

Immigration status and legal vulnerability have a disproportionate impact in shaping intra-ethnic tensions among precarious Latino immigrants, as tensions can arise between undocumented immigrants who have been in the US for a longer period of time and those who have more recently arrived, as well as between undocumented immigrants who have obtained some form of legal protection, such as DACA recipients, and those who lack legal status altogether (Mahler, 2018; Mallet & Pinto-Coelho, 2018). These differences in legal vulnerability can create power imbalances and hierarchies that contribute to tensions and rivalries between different groups of undocumented immigrants. In particular, the work of Abrego (2016) explores how undocumented status impacts Latino families in the USA and highlights that shared experiences of "illegality" can foster strong family bonds, as members support each other through the challenges of living with undocumented status. However, it also creates tensions, especially in mixed-status families, where differences in legal status lead to power imbalances and stress. Precarious Latino immigrants are particularly susceptible to these intersectional vulnerabilities, as previous research has shown that their legal status profoundly affects most aspects of their daily lives (Sigona, 2012:51). Additionally, competition for low-wage jobs and limited social services can contribute to tensions and rivalries between different groups of undocumented immigrants, particularly in urban areas with high levels of immigration and economic inequality (Cranford, 2005).

Importance of Investigating the Inclusion Mechanisms at the Local Level

Because precarious migration is defined by a certain relationship between the migrant and the state, there is a tendency to conceptualize it as a national issue. However, there is growing recognition of its local implications, as most interactions between precarious migrants and receiving societies occur at the local level, generating significant implications for local authorities or NGOs. This has led to the recognition of what Caponio and Borkert (2010), although in the context of migrants in general, refer to as the "local policy arena." Recently, the literature has focused on the impact that local authorities play in managing their de facto presence (Scholten & Penninx, 2016; Spencer, 2018; De Graauw & Vermeulen, 2021; Zapata-Barrero et al., 2017). Recent work has investigated local municipal practices towards this group (Spencer & Delvino, 2019, Bastick & Mallet-Garcia, 2022). This trend has gained renewed significance during the COVID-19 pandemic, as scholars and pundits have emphasized the reliance on precarious migrants and other essential workers (Tagliacozzo et al., 2020) and the need to include these migrants in local public health responses to COVID-19 (Mallet & Delvino, 2021).

This engenders a complex landscape wherein migrants, NGOs, and local authorities interface with the blurred lines between the restrictions and

affordances of public policy, calling for a local approach to this issue. While constrained to align with national policies, local authorities must also deal with the practical needs of irregular migrants, as their de facto presence is mainly felt at the local level (Homberger et al., 2022; Spencer & Triandafyllidou, 2020). This dynamic has prompted some municipalities to implement local policies and practices that extend beyond federal mandates. In certain areas, local law enforcement agencies have increasingly taken on roles in immigration enforcement, effectively amplifying the reach of federal policies. Armenta (2017) illustrates this in Tennessee, where initiatives like the 287(g) program have deputized local police officers to act as immigration agents. Armenta's analysis reveals how these changes have blurred the lines between local policing and federal immigration control, fundamentally shifting the mission of local law enforcement. This overlap has resulted in heightened surveillance, fear, and increased deportations within immigrant communities, as local policing becomes intertwined with immigration enforcement. Armenta and Alvarez (2017) further show the significant variability in how local law enforcement agencies across the USA approach immigration enforcement: while some police departments actively engage in immigration control by cooperating closely with federal agencies like Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), others deliberately distance themselves from such activities to maintain public trust and community safety. This variability reflects the differing priorities, resources, and pressures faced by local agencies.

Indeed, there are multiple municipalities that have implemented policies designed to ease the restrictions towards precarious migrants (Campomori & Ambrosini, 2020; Kirchhoff et al., 2022). Sanctuary cities in the U.S. provide a notable example of how policies and attitudes towards precarious migrants have evolved. Though the idea of sanctuary initially emerged in the 1980s, it was during the 2000s that sanctuary cities expanded substantially, leading the way in a wider international movement that sought to increase the inclusion of irregular migrants (Lambert & Swerts, 2019). While the concept of "sanctuary cities" lacks a commonly accepted definition (Lasch, et al., 2018; O'Brien, et al., 2019), it usually refers to cities that prevent city officials or police departments from inquiring into the immigration status of individuals they interact with, and can encompass differing policies and practices that focus on various populations based on the national context (Bauder, 2017). Many local governments have adopted this label or similar ones such as Inclusive Cities, Human Rights City, or Welcoming City (Lasch et al., 2018). These often establish firewalls, which provide a separation between immigration enforcement activities and public service provision (Crépeau & Hastie, 2015).

This is notably the case in San Francisco, a city where police forces have been instructed not to comply or implement federal immigration policy and procedures towards those suspected to be undocumented (Garcés Mascareñas, 2019). Cities' stance of the issue of precarious migration has an impact on this group, as it influences their behavior by shaping their sense of belonging. For instance, De Graauw (2016a, 2016b) shows how San Francisco has become a leader in protecting and integrating irregular migrants through the implementation of progressive local policies. As a sanctuary city, San Francisco has enacted policies that limit local law

enforcement's cooperation with federal immigration authorities. This includes not honoring ICE detainers unless they are accompanied by a judicial warrant, which protects undocumented immigrants from being handed over to federal authorities for deportation. Additionally, nonprofit organizations have successfully lobbied for policies that allow undocumented residents to access healthcare, education, and other public services: the San Francisco Health Plan's "Healthy San Francisco" program is a notable initiative that provides access to affordable healthcare for all residents, regardless of immigration status.

In the U.S., sanctuary cities have become a focal point of the immigration debate, particularly in the context of federal-state relations (Ascherio, 2022). Several major US cities have further played a critical role in expanding rights and protections to precarious migrants through local policies. For instance, Varsanyi (2006) has developed the concept of "urban citizenship" as an alternative framework to traditional notions of national citizenship to show how, in New York and Los Angeles, urban citizenship has developed. Urban citizenship focuses on the rights and responsibilities that individuals, including precarious migrants, can access at the local level, regardless of their legal status. This concept challenges the idea that citizenship and the rights associated with it are solely tied to national identity and legal status. Instead, Varsanyi argues that cities can extend certain rights and protections to all residents, thereby redefining what it means to be a citizen in an urban context. In New York City, Varsanyi discusses the implementation of the New York City Identity Card (IDNYC) program, which was launched in 2015 as a way to provide all residents, regardless of immigration status, with a form of identification that grants access to city services (e.g., open bank accounts, rent apartments, and access public libraries and other municipal services). In Los Angeles, the city's efforts to protect precarious immigrants are embodied through the implementation of policies like Special Order 40, which was issued by the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) in 1979. This order prohibits police officers from initiating contact with an individual solely to determine their immigration status. Special Order 40 was designed to ensure that undocumented immigrants would not be deterred from reporting crimes or cooperating with law enforcement out of fear of deportation.

In North America, cities like New York and Toronto have adopted policies that extend certain protections to undocumented migrants, such as access to municipal ID cards, healthcare, and education. In these contexts, deservingness frames often emphasize the economic contributions of undocumented migrants, such as their roles as essential workers, taxpayers, and integral members of the community. This was notably the case in Californian cities that supported the DREAMer movement and emphasized the deservingness of these young adults (Nicholls, 2013). A similar trend has also developed in Europe, albeit in a different context (Bazurli & de Graauw, 2023). A study by Chauvin and Garcés-Mascareñas (2012) shows that in Europe, cities like Barcelona and Amsterdam have implemented local policies that provide undocumented migrants with access to healthcare, education, and other social services. These cities often justify their policies by highlighting the humanitarian needs of migrants, particularly those related to health and family welfare, framing these migrants as deserving based on their vulnerability and basic human rights.

Methodology

The data for this paper were collected as part of one seed-funding grand and two larger studies: (1) a France-Stanford Center for Interdisciplinary Studies award (2016–2018); (2) a Marie Sklodowska Curie Individual Fellowship funded by the European Commission from 2018 until 2020 investigating the integration processes of Latino immigrants (documented and undocumented): "The Role of the Welfare State in the Integration of Immigrants: Comparative Analysis of Latino Communities in Spain, the United Kingdom and the USA" (Project n° 787,336); and (3) a Thomas Jefferson research grant funded by FACE foundation titled "Immigrant Legal Status & Integration Across National Contexts." The interviews were carried out by both co-authors.

Recruitment of Interviewees

This paper is grounded in qualitative research and draws on in-depth interviews with 87 precarious Latino immigrants, of which 22 were DACA recipients and most of the respondents were Mexican (68 of the 87 respondents). The interviews were conducted over a 4-year period, from 2016 to 2020, in the San Francisco Bay Area in California. The selection of this location was based on two considerations: the significance of the local context and the diverse mix of legal statuses among the Latino immigrant population residing there.

To recruit respondents for the study, a snowball sampling technique was employed, utilizing connections within the Latino communities. The research team initiated interviews through established networks, and from these initial contacts, the sample size was expanded by requesting referrals from interviewees, such as friends, relatives, or coworkers, who were also experiencing precarious legal situations. The interviews took place in various settings, including cafes, parks, and occasionally in the participants' homes. The language used during the interviews was flexible, with a slight majority of the interviewees opting to respond in English, sometimes incorporating Spanish or Spanglish terms. For the remaining interviews, Spanish was used as the primary language. Each interview lasted approximately an hour and 30 min.

Given the timing of the interviews, occurring at the time or shortly after the announcement of the Trump administration's intention to end DACA, the study had the unique opportunity to assess the impact of precarious legal status on DACA recipients. To guide the interview process and explore relevant themes comprehensively, a semi-structured interview questionnaire was employed. This questionnaire covered a range of topics, including detailed histories of migration experiences, current living situations, socio-economic profiles, perceptions of inclusion in the SFBA, and views on the DACA program. For DACA recipients specifically, additional questions were asked about their experiences living under DACA status and their overall sense of belonging, including future plans.

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, ensuring accuracy in data preservation. The researchers then used ATLAS.ti to code the interview

transcripts and notes. The initial coding phase utilized the predefined categories from the semi-structured interview guide. These categories facilitated standardized data collection, enabling better comparison of participants' positions and experiences.

During the interviews, participants were encouraged to elaborate on various aspects of their lives that they deemed relevant to the study, even if not explicitly covered in the initial interview guide. This open-ended approach allowed the research team to capture new perspectives and aspects that might have been overlooked initially. Information gathered during this phase was subsequently coded in a second coding process, expanding the study's insights and incorporating additional factors, such as the role of gender in shaping participants' experiences.

Overall, this methodological approach ensured a comprehensive understanding of the experiences and perspectives of precarious Latino immigrants, including DACA recipients, in the SFBA, shedding light on the impact of their legal status and providing valuable insights for the study.

Profile of Interviewees

Our sample is representative of the diverse demographic profile of precarious Latino migrants in California. The main characteristics of our interviewees are listed in Table 1.

Findings

An analysis of the interviews shows the influence of some of the local NGOs in fostering a pan-ethnic identity and sense of belonging among precarious Latino immigrants in the SFBA. The majority of respondents (80%) for this study indicate they believe that local NGOs have been instrumental in building solidarity and bringing Latino immigrants together. In particular, they report that in response to a surge of anti-immigrant policies following the election of Donald Trump in 2016, local NGOs have implemented strategies to counter anti-immigrant rhetoric—especially towards undocumented migrants. Ermelinda, a precarious immigrant from El Salvador who entered the USA without authorization over 20 years ago when she was in her early 20 s, explains that this external pressure acted as a catalyst for the formation of a pan-ethnic identity among precarious immigrants, as they found common ground in their shared experiences of marginalization and targeted hostility.

> I don't normally attend events that gather [precarious migrants], because we are all very different, I am here to work, and take care of my children, nothing else. But something changed when President Trump was elected, and my kids got really scared that we would be separated, that they [immigration services] would take me away. So I felt like that I had to do something to protect them. (…) I think local associations started to be more active, they reached out that they were there to help and so I started to go to meetings. They had

Table 1 Characteristics of the respondents: age, gender, country of birth, income, educational level

ID	Gender	Nationality	Age	Education	Income (individual)
1	Male	Mexican	18 to 29	Some college	\$25,000–\$34,999/year
2	Female	Mexican	18 to 29	High school diploma	\$25,000–\$34,999/year
3	Female	Mexican	18 to 29	Some college	\$15,000–\$24,999/year
4	Male	Salvadorian	18 to 29	Some college	\$15,000–\$24,999/year
5	Female	Mexican	18 to 29	Some college	≤ \$15,000/year
6	Female	Mexican	30 to 39	Some college	\$25,000–\$34,999/year
7	Female	Mexican	18 to 29	Some college	≤ \$15,000/year
8	Male	Salvadorian	30 to 39	Graduate school	≥ \$35,000
9	Female	Mexican	30 to 39	College	\$15,000–\$24,999/year
10	Female	Mexican	18 to 29	Some college	\$15,000–\$24,999/year
11	Female	Mexican	18 to 29	High school diploma	≤ \$15,000/year
12	Male	Mexican	18 to 29	High school diploma	≤ \$15,000/year
13	Female	Mexican	30 to 39	Some college	≤ \$15,000/year
14	Male	Mexican	18 to 29	College	\$25,000–\$34,999/year
15	Female	Mexican	30 to 39	Some college	\$25,000–\$34,999/year
16	Female	Mexican	30 to 39	College	\$15,000–\$24,999/year
17	Female	Mexican	18 to 29	High school diploma	≤ \$15,000/year
19	Male	Colombian	18 to 29	Some college	≤ \$15,000/year
20	Male	Mexican	30 to 39	Some college	\$15,000–\$24,999/year
21	Female	Mexican	18 to 29	College	\$15,000–\$24,999/year
22	Female	Mexican	30 to 39	Some college	≤ \$15,000/year
23	Male	Honduran	30 to 39	College	\$25,000–\$34,999/year
24	Female	Mexican	30 to 39	Some college	≤ \$15,000/year
25	Female	Mexican	18 to 29	Some college	\$15,000–\$24,999/year
26	Male	Mexican	18 to 29	High school diploma	≤ \$15,000/year
27	Female	Mexican	18 to 29	High school diploma	≤ \$15,000/year
28	Female	Mexican	30 to 39	Graduate school	≥ \$35,000
29	Male	Mexican	18 to 29	Some college	\$15,000–\$24,999/year
30	Male	Mexican	30 to 39	Some college	≤ \$15,000/year
32	Female	Colombian	30 to 39	Some college	≤ \$15,000/year
33	Female	Mexican	18 to 29	Some college	≤ \$15,000/year
34	Male	Mexican	18 to 29	Some college	≤ \$15,000/year
35	Male	Mexican	18 to 29	Some college	\$15,000–\$24,999/year
36	Female	Guatemalan	18 to 29	High school diploma	≤ \$15,000/year
37	Female	Mexican	18 to 29	High school diploma	\$15,000–\$24,999/year
38	Female	Mexican	18 to 29	College	≥ \$35,000
39	Female	Mexican	18 to 29	Some college	≥ \$35,000
40	Female	Mexican	18 to 29	High school diploma	≤ \$15,000/year
41	Female	Mexican	30 to 39	College	≤ \$15,000/year
42	Female	Mexican	30 to 39	Some college	\$25,000–\$34,999/year
43	Male	Mexican	18 to 29	High school diploma	≤ \$15,000/year
44	Female	Mexican	18 to 29	Graduate school	\$25,000–\$34,999/year

Table 1 (continued)

ID	Gender	Nationality	Age	Education	Income (individual)
45	Male	Mexican	18 to 29	Graduate school	≤ $15,000/year
46	Female	Mexican	30 to 39	Graduate school	$25,000–$34,999/year
47	Female	Mexican	30 to 39	College	≤ $15,000/year
48	Male	Mexican	30 to 39	College	≥ $35,000
49	Male	Salvadorian	30 to 39	College	$25,000–$34,999/year
50	Male	Mexican	30 to 39	College	≤ $15,000/year
51	Female	Mexican	30 to 39	Graduate school	≥ $35,000
52	Female	Mexican	30 to 39	Some college	≤ $15,000/year
53	Female	Guatemalan	30 to 39	High school diploma	$15,000–$24,999/year
54	Male	Mexican	18 to 29	College	≤ $15,000/year
55	Male	Mexican	18 to 29	High school diploma	$15,000–$24,999/year
56	Male	Mexican	30 to 39	Graduate school	≥ $35,000
57	Female	Mexican	18 to 29	College	$25,000–$34,999/year
58	Male	Mexican	30 to 39	Graduate school	$15,000–$24,999/year
58	Female	Mexican	30 to 39	College	$25,000–$34,999/year
60	Male	Mexican	30 to 39	Graduate school	≥ $35,000
61	Male	Guatemalan	18 to 29	Some college	≤ $15,000/year
62	Male	Mexican	18 to 29	Graduate school	≥ $35,000
63	Male	Mexican	30 to 39	College	$25,000–$34,999/year
64	Female	Mexican	30 to 39	Graduate school	≥ $35,000
65	Female	Salvadorian	30 to 39	College	$25,000–$34,999/year
66	Female	Mexican	26 to 35	Graduate school	≥ $35,000
67	Male	Mexican	18 to 25	Graduate school	≤ $15,000/year
68	Female	Mexican	36 to 45	Graduate school	$25,000–$34,999/year
69	Female	Mexican	26 to 35	College	≤ $15,000/year
70	Male	Mexican	36 to 45	College	≥ $35,000
71	Male	Salvadorian	26 to 35	College	$15,000–$24,999/year
72	Male	Mexican	26 to 35	College	≤ $15,000/year
73	Female	Mexican	26 to 35	Graduate school	≥ $35,000
74	Female	Mexican	26 to 35	College	≤ $15,000/year
75	Female	Guatemalan	26 to 35	High school diploma	$15,000–$24,999/year
76	Male	Mexican	18 to 25	College	≤ $15,000/year
77	Male	Colombian	26 to 35	High school diploma	$15,000–$24,999/year
78	Male	Colombian	26 to 35	Graduate school	≥ $35,000
79	Female	Colombian	26 to 35	College	≥ $35,000
80	Male	Colombian	36 to 45	Graduate school	≥ $35,000
81	Female	Mexican	26 to 35	College	$25,000–$34,999/year
82	Male	Mexican	26 to 35	Graduate school	≥ $35,000
83	Male	Guatemalan	26 to 35	College B.A	≥ $35,000
84	Male	Mexican	26 to 35	Graduate school	≤ $15,000/year
85	Male	Mexican	36 to 45	College B.Sc	$25,000–$34,999/year
86	Female	Mexican	36 to 45	Graduate school	≥ $35,000

Table 1 (continued)

ID	Gender	Nationality	Age	Education	Income (individual)
87	Female	Salvadorian	26 to 35	College B.A	$25,000–$34,999/year

> 'Know Your Rights' gatherings, not far, at the local school. It felt safe there, so I decided to go, and see what my options were. (…) So we started to talk with other people, not only from El Salvador, and it felt good to see that there were other people in the same situation, Mexicans, Colombians, Hondurans. (…) We kept in touch, because I came to realize that we share the same struggle, so we help each other out. (…).

The hostile rhetoric and restrictive policies implemented at the national level, such as the rescission of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, contrasted even more starkly with the more inclusive policies at the local level of the SFBA. They enabled local NGOs to reinforce a shared sense of linked fate (Sanchez & Masuoka, 2010) as they actively mobilized to defend the rights and interests of Latinos, including precarious migrants. By organizing protests, community forums, and political campaigns, these organizations helped create a sense of solidarity and galvanize a collective response and fostered a sense of shared struggle and identity among precarious Latino immigrants. This is exemplified by Rafael, a volunteer at a local NGO that promotes unity across minority groups in Oakland and San Francisco. Rafael, who arrived in the U.S. as a child and received DACA in 2015, has volunteered with several organizations in the SFBA. He explains how Latinos have come together:

> We [Latinos] have to come together, forget our differences, it's not important if you have papers and I don't, (…) like the Asians they have Chinatown, we do the same here, and look out for each other. (…) That's what we do here at [name of organization]. We unite together and we fight racism, we create a strong community because alone we can't do anything. (…) I keep telling my people, we don't care what we thought about each other before, we need to come together if we want to win. (…) That's a big part of what I do here. (…) Now we have a great community, we have people from all over Latin America that come here, we created a strong community. We are proud to be Latinos.

As a reaction to the external perception of threat, our interviewees further explained that they felt the need to come together. This is exemplified by David,[7] a Colombian immigrant who arrived in the Bay Area in 2014 on a student visa and overstayed when his visa expired. As a Colombian national, he had initially sought other Colombian immigrants in his host country to recreate a sense of familiarity. He had been able to find employment thanks to fellow Colombians already present in the Bay Area. However, during the conversation, he explained that overtime, he had become friends with other Latin American individuals and had progressively

[7] All names have been changed.

understood the importance of the "Latino" categorization, which he only became familiar with in the U.S.:

> The fight [that Latinos are fighting in the U.S.] it has an impact on me, because what affects them [Latinos], affects me. What they are doing with DACA, that's unfair. What I like about living here is that it feels like we are all together in this fight, when they [the Trump administration] attacked DACA it also affects us [all immigrants]. I never used to see it like that before I came here but I know that we need to support each other here because we are all a target. (…) I am still Colombian, of course, but I also feel Mexican too and Latino, because we face the same discrimination and we need to unite against racist people (…) I don't have DACA but I still go to rallies for them.

This underscores the dynamic and context-dependent nature of ethnic identity formation, shaped by external factors and collective responses to adversity, and shows that pan-ethnic identity can transcend national, cultural, and linguistic differences and unite Latinos together in their shared experiences of discrimination. In the face of adversity, the development of solidarity and of a pan-ethnicity among precarious Latino immigrants in the SFBA served as a source of strength and resilience. It enabled them to counteract the negative rhetoric and restrictive national policies by organizing politically, advocating for their rights, and amplifying their voices. Local NGOs have implemented strategies to counter anti-immigrant rhetoric and played a crucial role in consolidating the pan-ethnic identity of precarious Latino immigrants. They are active in their community-building efforts to foster a sense of shared struggle and collective identity. At some of the events they organize, which are usually held in safe places such as local schools or community centers, immigrants may receive guidance, counselling, and answers to their questions. The precarious migrants who attend these meetings also sometimes receive small cards that they could show officials in case they were arrested, or someone knocked on their door. Ermelinda, for instance, received one of those cards that explain that its holder does not need to answer questions from police officers or does not have to let them in their house unless they have a warrant [picture]. Various formats of these cards exist, most of them have an English and a Spanish version, and they sometimes include the contact details of a lawyer to call in case they get arrested. These cards have been circulating for many years, but Ermelinda explains that she never felt the need to carry one with her until now. According to her, the anti-Latino feeling peaked around the 2016 election time and led to a climate of fear, uncertainty, and hostility towards immigrants, particularly those with precarious legal status. This feeling was shared by over 70% of all interviewees.

In contrast to the findings by Zhirkov and Smilan-Goldstein (2023), which suggest that practical factors such as job availability and low crime rates outweigh the influence of sanctuary status on migration preferences, our study reveals that the local context and perceived hospitability towards immigrants can be a decisive factor for newly arrived migrants. Specifically, just over 60% of our respondents indicated that the welcoming reputation of the Bay Area for immigrants, particularly those in precarious legal situation, played a more critical role in their decision to settle there than traditional motivators like familial connections. This suggests that for certain

immigrant populations, especially those facing precarious legal situations, the perceived social and political environment of a location may have a stronger pull than previously understood, challenging the notion that economic and safety concerns are always the primary drivers in migration decisions. This divergence highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of the factors influencing immigrant settlement patterns, particularly in regions with strong reputations for inclusivity. For instance, Lucia, a DACA recipient who arrived in the U.S. when she was 7 and lived in Arizona until she moved to San Francisco at the age of 21, explains that she feels that NGOs are able to get more done in this positive context.

> I still have cousins who live in Arizona, and there, [NGOs] can't help you, because [Arizona] has different laws. But here in San Francisco, the laws are better for immigrants so [NGOs] can actually help you and fight for you. Like with DACA, there you can't get a driver's license, but here you can. This makes a huge difference in your life.

When Lucia first tried to obtain a driver's license in Arizona, she was undocumented and in the process of applying for DACA. In Arizona, undocumented immigrants are not eligible to obtain driver's licenses due to state laws that require proof of legal presence in the U.S. However, DACA recipients can, since 2014, obtain driver's licenses. Initially, Arizona attempted to block DACA recipients from getting licenses, but a federal court ruled in 2014 that this policy was unconstitutional. As a result, Arizona began issuing driver's licenses to DACA recipients in December 2014. However, undocumented immigrants without DACA status still cannot obtain a driver's license in the state of Arizona. In Lucia's case, she moved to California as she received DACA, and her comment shows that even though DACA recipients can now obtain a driver's license in Arizona (since 2014), the perception that Arizona is impeding precarious migrants' lives remains pervasive and sharply contrasts with California's position at the forefront of providing access to driver's licenses for undocumented immigrants under Assembly Bill 60 (AB 60).

The success of these local NGOs can be attributed, in part, to their effective framing strategies. By presenting the issues faced by precarious Latino immigrants as matters of social justice and human rights, these organizations garner support from a broader coalition of allies and stakeholders and further create a sense of solidarity among the Latino communities. This framing—as previously indicated in the literature (Magazzini, 2015)—not only strengthens the Latino pan-ethnic identity but also generates political momentum that helps foster policy changes that benefit the entire community. The collaboration between NGOs and immigrant communities in framing their experiences demonstrates the transformative potential of grassroots activism. This is illustrated by Xelfi, a Honduran immigrant who has been working at an NGO that helps women with precarious status. She explained that instead of focusing on individuals' legal status, the organization adopts a holistic approach that aims to foster inclusion of all people, including those without legal status:

> The work we do here is mainly for undocumented women, we help those who have been victims of violence, abuse, trafficking. But we welcome everyone too. (…) Our strategy is to be as inclusive as possible, we don't really mention

> undocumented migrants, because of the weight that it carries but we talk about basic human rights, decency; we are careful to frame it in a way that would not be harmful to our clients.

This further aligns with previous studies that show that NGOs' successes have been more pronounced when they focus their campaign not on immigrant empowerment but rather on more universalistic arguments that would show how these measures would benefit all city residents (Vimo, 2022; De Graauw, 2017). Even in an area as inclusive as the SFBA, local NGOs are careful not to openly frame their strategy around helping precarious immigrants specifically, but rather they talk about "opportunities for Latinos and other historically underserved communities, to ensure justice is never limited by race/ethnicity, class, gender identity, age, sexual orientation, religion, immigration status, country of origin and disability status" (MEDA).[8] Among organizations that cater primarily to immigrant communities and provide legal counselling such as La Raza Central Legal San Francisco, they do not mention precarious migrants but state that they "provide high quality, free legal representation to the Latino community and other low-income immigrant families".[9]

However, this study also highlights the limits to local NGOs' ability to promote the inclusion of precarious Latino immigrants. Despite the gains achieved in coalition-building, particularly in the face of anti-immigrant sentiment and policies, our study suggests that there remain nonetheless many obstacles that hamper fuller inclusion. As discussed previously, precarious Latino immigrants sometimes experience tension, rivalry, and hostility from their own communities as they may find that social hierarchies that exist in their countries of origin are replicated in the US, thereby contributing to a sense of exclusion and discrimination. They grapple with societal stigmatization from both the wider society, as well as from their own communities. This prevents some members of the community from joining or seeking assistance from NGOs and therefore reduces the sense of solidarity among the Latino communities. This is exemplified by Emilio, a Mexican national in his mid-30 s who settled in the Bay Area just over 10 years ago after being smuggled into the U.S. When he first arrived, he received help from family members, notably his cousins, who suggested that he contact a local organization whose goal is to provide assistance to newly arrived migrants, mainly from Mexico. However, when he contacted the organization, he recounted that his lack of regular legal status seemed to have prevented him from getting help.

> I don't see the benefits of getting help from [NGOs]. I went there in the past, but they don't help people like me. Us [precarious migrants] get the short end of the stick; we are scapegoated, we are at the bottom [of the hierarchies]. (…) When I went to [NGOs name], they made me feel like I should not be here; one of the workers there, she made me wait and come back so many times, in the end I gave up.(…) She said I was not the priority, because she had to help [documented Mexican] people first.

[8] https://medasf.org/

[9] https://www.lrcl.org/

During our conversation, Emilio explained that NGOs run by individuals of Mexican origin tend to prioritize assisting documented Mexican immigrants over those who are undocumented. This underscores the significant role that legal status plays in shaping the experiences of migrants facing precarious situations. Among our participants, two-thirds of the Mexican respondents reported feeling discriminated against at least once when seeking help from predominantly Mexican-staffed organizations due to their undocumented status. Conversely, Emilio's experiences with NGOs primarily staffed by non-Mexicans were more positive. He noted that while the assistance provided was sometimes limited, the reception he received was generally more welcoming and supportive.

Even though the brunt of the discrimination is borne by this group, it is nonetheless interesting to note that a small number of documented Latino immigrants who were interviewed also recounted instances of discrimination at the hands of precarious Latino migrants. This form of "reverse" discrimination became particularly pronounced within the labor market, notably in industries where precarious migrants constitute the predominant workforce (e.g., service industry). As a reaction, these documented Latino immigrants expressed a reluctance to align themselves with the struggles of their precarious counterparts. This reluctance to join forces underscores the profound influence of legal standing on their outlook and behavior. It sheds light on the perceived advantages held by individuals who have succeeded in attaining legal status, emphasizing the perceived privilege that accompanies such an achievement. This intricate dynamic illuminates the complex interplay between legal categorizations and social hierarchies within migrant communities and acts as a powerful break in attempts to further promote solidarity among the Latino communities.

An analysis of the interviews indicates that to counter these challenges, one strategy that has been used by some precarious Latino migrants is to seek assistance from pan-ethnic—and sometimes inter-ethnic—organizations instead of NGOs that cater to specific national groups. Our respondents indicated that these NGOs often provide a more supportive environment where they are less likely to experience discrimination. They reported that these organizations better help create spaces for dialogue, empowerment, and collective action, fostering a sense of belonging and solidarity in their overall community. Over 50% of the precarious Latino migrants interviewed who joined these NGOs reported being more likely to develop a stronger sense of belonging after joining them. By turning to pan-ethnic NGOs, precarious Latino migrants attempt to counter the social hierarchies they may perceive within their own community. In the SFBA, many organizations advocating for immigrant rights often opt for narratives that sidestep direct confrontation of issues related to race and power. Instead, they tend to adopt language centered on shared progressive values, aiming to foster inclusion of the community at large.

Conclusion

Our research illustrates how Latino pan-ethnic identity was bolstered in the San Francisco Bay area at a time when anti-immigrant rhetoric was rising. The complex journey through immigration enforcement, coupled with restricted access to

resources and social marginalization, has cemented a foundation for shared struggles and experiences. This journey not only heightened awareness of shared circumstances but also spurred collective action and fortified a resolve to unite against adversity. The emergence of a reactive ethnicity in response to these challenges seems to have empowered and mobilized some of the members of the precarious Latino community and reinforced their sense of solidarity.

Corroborating previous research (De Graauw, 2017), our study accentuates the essential role local NGOs and grassroots organizations have played in attaining policy successes and enhancing the lives of precarious Latino immigrants. The achievements of these organizations, generally run by members of the Latino community, underline the transformative capability of grassroots activism and emphasize the pivotal role of local context in nurturing a pan-ethnic identity among precarious immigrants in the SFBA. Specifically, local NGOs have been instrumental in supplying vital resources, legal aid, and social services to mitigate the impacts of anti-immigrant policies and foster a sense of collective resilience and identity. By offering platforms for community members to share stories, forge connections, and organize for societal transformation, these NGOs have positively influenced the cultivation of a Latino pan-ethnic identity among precarious Latino immigrants in the SFBA.

The concept of reactive ethnicity typically underscores the creation of a collective identity rooted in national origin as a countermeasure to external pressures. Yet, our study unveils a nuance: precarious Latino immigrants appear to lean towards pan-ethnic (as well as inter-ethnic) NGOs to alleviate internal discord, circumvent societal hierarchies, create solidarity, and counteract discrimination within their specific national origin groups. This trend fortifies their sense of community belonging and sheds light on the complex dynamics that shape the identity formation within precarious Latino communities.

Recent scholarship (De Graauw, 2016a, 2016b, 2021; Longazel, 2016) has posited that alliances with labor groups may cultivate support for inclusive immigrant policies. However, our findings reveal that legal status, along with ethno-racial factors, still serves as a divide that hinders NGOs' coalition-building endeavors. This pattern amplifies the understanding that the ramifications of immigration politics are most palpable at the local level and continue to shape the identity formation of precarious Latino immigrants in the U.S.

Declarations

Competing Interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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