Burden of the Secret: A Study of Undocumented Families in Texas
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Introduction
- Roughly 6 million undocumented families in the U.S. have children (Capps, Fix, & Zong, 2016).
- Undocumented immigrant parents living in the U.S. face parenting challenges specific to status.
- Few studies have examined whether undocumented parents discuss their status with their children and their perceptions of their children’s experiences.

This study aimed to:
- Identify the ways parents perceive legal status impact their children
- Describe how parents communicate with their children about their status

Methods
- Mixed methods interview-based study
- 70 semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with undocumented Latino parents in two Texas cities.
- Participants were over age 18, undocumented, and had at least one child under 18 years old.
- Interviews explored parents’ perceptions of the impact their legal status had on their child’s wellbeing.
- Thematic analysis was used to develop themes about: -children’s experiences with undocumented parents -how parents discussed their status with their children.
- Content analysis was used to explore patterns in the frequencies that certain topics were discussed.

Findings
Parents describe that their undocumented status poses a heavy burden for their children.
- Parents reported that their children experienced intense fear and anxiety over being left alone in the event that they were deported.
  - “What will become of me if you are deported?”
- Parents related situations where children expressed beliefs that good behavior could protect them from deportation.
  - “Daddy, I want to ask you for a gift on my birthday [...]. I want you to behave yourself, so the police doesn’t take you [...]”
- 51% (n=26) of parents reported that their children offered to “fix” their papers.
  - “Just wait until I turn 21 years old, and then I will fix your papers so we can travel together to Mexico.”
- 27% (n=19) of parents interviewed did not discuss the threat of deportation with their children.
  - “My daughter is not ready for the responsibility this knowledge brings.”

Implications
- Family separation – or even just the threat of separation – is stressful for children, pointing to the need for immigration policies that prioritize keeping families together.
- Professionals working with undocumented parents should recognize that families could benefit from services that help them to manage the uncertainties tied to undocumented immigration status.
- Future research should examine interventions that work with undocumented parents to deal with issues related to migration, family separation and the socioeconomic exclusion of undocumented life.