

UNDOCUMENTED AND ESSENTIAL

A Profile of Undocumented Women in California

Immigrant women who are undocumented are integral members of California's dynamic economy, diverse communities, and vibrant cultures. But they are overlooked in America's immigration debate.

Executive Summary

Nearly one million immigrant women who are undocumented live, work, and raise their families in California. They harvest, prepare, pack, and serve the food that sustains the United States. They are college students and businesswomen. They care for the young, the elderly, and the sick. They clean the offices, hotels, and homes of California businesses and families. They are mothers to upwards of 1.8 million California children.¹

Yet just as these women are compelled by their immigration status to live in the shadows, their lives, labors, and aspirations are rendered invisible in public debate about America’s immigration system. Forty-five percent of undocumented people in the United States are women. But when the media or politicians discuss America’s immigration challenges, the immigrants they talk about tend to be men. With men as the norm, women’s distinctive experiences and concerns are ignored.

The Gender Equity Policy Institute’s “Undocumented and Essential” presents a data-based profile of California’s undocumented women, their families, their work, and their current economic challenges. To estimate the number of undocumented immigrants in California, researchers at the Institute analyzed data compiled from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the U.S. Census American Community Survey (ACS) for the years prior to the covid-19 pandemic. The Institute proceeded to interact the data by gender to uncover key facts about undocumented women’s work, income, health, housing, and family. While other institutes and researchers have published estimates on the number of undocumented people in the U.S. and how many are women and men, no others have disaggregated demographic and labor force data by gender to investigate the living conditions of undocumented women specifically.

As the following report shows, undocumented women make vital contributions to California’s economy. They have high rates of labor force participation. The industries in which they work are critical to the success and growth of the state’s \$3.4 trillion economy.² But undocumented women face significant barriers in their efforts to access economic opportunity—barriers that

Key Findings About Undocumented Women in California:

- Undocumented women earn 49 cents to every \$1 earned by white men³
- 62% are in the labor force
- The median income of women working in the ten most common occupations is \$22,337, roughly \$3,500 below the poverty threshold for a family of four⁴
- Only 55% have health insurance
- Undocumented women are half as likely to live in a home owned by themselves or a family member, compared to California women overall
- 21% live below the poverty line
- 70% are Latina, 21% are Asian Pacific Islander
- At least 800,000 of the 1.8 million children living with undocumented mothers are U.S. citizens

are higher than those encountered by undocumented men. Undocumented women are paid less for similar work than all other Californian workers. They have high rates of poverty and low rates of homeownership and health insurance.

Undocumented women are integral members of California’s dynamic economy, diverse communities, and vibrant cultures. Recognizing the contributions that immigrants make to the state and its economy, as well as the hardships imposed by a federal immigration system widely acknowledged to be dysfunctional, California’s leaders have over the years enacted policies to advance immigrant economic participation, safety, and social integration. Labor laws and safety regulations aimed at industries with high rates of immigrant labor, for example, provide needed protections to all essential workers, many of whom are undocumented. As policymakers look ahead, the 2022 budget surplus provides an opportunity to uplift the families of 2.2 million undocumented Californians who make up a critical mass of the state’s workforce and help propel economic growth in the nation’s largest economy.