




Article

Belonging and Its Barriers: A Critical Perspective of Latiné and Mixed-Status Families' Experiences

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Abstract: This article presents findings from a four-year collaborative research project on immigrant and mixed-status families in Santa Cruz County, California. The project employed a new model of critical community-engaged scholarship called Community Initiated Student Engaged Research (CISER) in order to gain access to and build trust with this vulnerable population. The study used an overarching theoretical framework of “belonging” to identify six key factors most consequential for belonging and/or exclusion, including access to education, economic security, legal immigration status, health services, opportunities for youth, and social networks. The findings reveal the complex and interconnected nature of these factors and demonstrate how exclusion experienced due to a lack of legal immigration status had far-reaching effects on interviewees’ job prospects and experiences of economic, health, and housing insecurity. The article highlights the importance of using an assets-based approach to draw out the myriad ways interviewees and communities create spaces, networks, and ways to promote and enhance both material and emotional forms of belonging. The CISER model and its participatory approach also provide tangible benefits for community partners and undergraduate researchers. This article contributes to the literature on immigrant experiences and critical community-engaged research while offering insights into sources of and systemic barriers to collective belonging.

Keywords: belonging; community-engagement; mixed-status; immigration; Latiné



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1. Introduction

Drawing on a four-year collaborative research project of service providers and immigrant and mixed-status families¹, this article offers insights into sources of and systemic barriers to collective belonging, while also highlighting a model of critical community-engaged scholarship involving undergraduate students, which we call Community Initiated Student Engaged Research (CISER) (Greenberg et al. 2020). The research project, “We Belong: Collaboration for Community Engaged Research and Immigrant Justice”, which took place from 2019 to 2022, focused on the lived experiences of immigrant and mixed-legal-status families in Santa Cruz County, California. It involved an interdisciplinary project team including faculty, staff, graduate students, 80 undergraduates, and 8 community organizations. The team conducted 5 focus groups and 77 individual interviews with social and immigrant service providers, advocates, and multiple members of mixed-status and immigrant families. The research project was designed to generate new, locally actionable knowledge to strengthen a county-wide coalition providing social services to immigrants while training and mentoring first-generation undergraduate researchers in critical community-engaged research.

We argue that the CISER model and its participatory approach helped build trust with and include a vulnerable and hard-to-reach population to investigate difficult and often-sensitive issues that have been under-researched. “Belonging” was collaboratively

and strategically selected as the overarching theoretical framework because it allowed the collaborative research team to identify key forces, institutions, and mechanisms leading to social, economic, and political stratification or exclusion, as well as how such forces and mechanisms are subjectively and viscerally experienced by immigrants themselves (Yuval-Davis 2006; Evaristo 2017). We also chose a “belonging” framework as an assets-based approach to draw out the myriad of ways interviewees and communities, although vulnerable, nevertheless resist exclusion and themselves create spaces, networks, and ways to promote and enhance material, cultural, and emotional forms of belonging (Bissell 2019).

Overall, we found—across both service providers and immigrant family members—six key factors that were the most common and consequential for belonging and/or exclusion, including the existence of places/spaces and social networks in which interviewees felt belonging or exclusion; levels of economic security/insecurity; access to education; legal immigration status; access to health services; and opportunities for youth and young people to build community. Through our use of in-depth interviews and focus groups, we also demonstrate and highlight how complex and interconnected these aspects of belonging and exclusion can be. For example, exclusion experienced due to a lack of legal immigration status (a form of political exclusion) had far-reaching effects on interviewees’ job prospects and thus their experiences of economic, health, and housing insecurity (forms of social, economic, and spatial exclusion). Complexity is also demonstrated in constructions of belonging through exclusion. For example, in the face of multiple exclusions by dominant groups and institutions, immigrant family members and immigrant service providers nevertheless came together to create a sense of community, group identity, and cultural pride (Abrego and Schmalzbauer 2018). Methodologically, we also found that the collaborative and participatory CISER process had tangible benefits (beyond the research findings) for community partners and undergraduate researchers.

Literature Review

Belonging is useful as a concept for studying immigrant populations because it combines a structural analysis of social and political institutions with a subject-level analysis of identities and emotional attachments (Evaristo 2017). Yuval-Davis (2006) defines belonging—at the individual level—as fundamentally a sense of emotional attachment: “about feeling ‘at home’...and about feeling ‘safe’”. However, as she and others note, belonging cannot be reduced to individual or psychological attachment, but offers a broader connection to the social and physical world (Zayas and Gulbas 2017). As John A. Powell notes, “‘belonging’ connotes something fundamental about how groups are positioned within society, as well as how they are perceived and regarded. It reflects an objective position of power and resources as well as the intersubjective nature of group-based identities” (Powell and Menendian 2016). Attentive to its dynamics, Yuval-Davis provides a comprehensive, three-level analytical framework to address both subject-level belonging and the more structural “dirty work of boundary maintenance”, or the ways belonging is produced and reproduced in particular ways to particular collectives or places (Yuval-Davis 2006).

The first level of analysis is that of social locations, or the level of group boundaries often drawn and made consequential at broader, often societal scales. Here, social boundaries—along lines such as race, class, nationality, age group, and profession—can reflect various social locations and categories that have certain positionalities along axes of power, reinforced by various institutions. While there are a myriad different categories, some boundaries are more meaningful or consequential than others, depending on specific historical, political, and social contexts. Finally, overall, social locations are constituted intersectionally and along multiple axes of difference. Thus, an analysis of belonging at the level of social location requires investigating, under particular historical conditions, the interaction of different types and saliences of social divisions that help define the power relations among different members of society. Other scholars similarly focus on this level of analysis, pointing out the importance of institutions and mechanisms that help enforce and

reproduce boundaries of belonging and not belonging. Prilleltensky's ecological model of psychological "levels of well-being" emphasizes the importance of institutional, organizational, and communal actors contributing to or inhibiting individual belonging and well-being (Prilleltensky 2012).

Scholars focused on immigrant belonging have highlighted key boundaries, actors, and institutions at the level of social location that are particularly salient for migrants. Gonzales (2016) argues that for many Latino immigrants to the United States, their immigration and/or citizenship status—being either "legal" or "illegal"—acts as a kind of "master status", a particular social location or boundary that trumps or dominates all other statuses (such as age or gender or race) in determining an individual's general social location. Legal status is, in fact, so consequential for immigrants that some scholars argue that US immigration laws can lead to "legal violence"; in other words, "serve as legitimating sources for the harmful treatment of immigrants" (Abrego 2015, p. 265). Thus, being a non-citizen and an undocumented migrant under such circumstances can produce fear and anxiety among migrants, and increase their vulnerability to exploitation and other forms of exclusion (see also De Genova 2002). For many immigrants, the nation-state and its institutions as arbiters and enforcers of citizenship status are particularly powerful gatekeepers and determiners of belonging and well-being. Other state institutions at regional and local levels are similarly consequential, although they can vary significantly in terms of their capacity and willingness to enforce boundaries. For example, when comparing Latina migrants in Montana and California, Abrego and Schmalzbauer (2018) argue how place and local-level conditions can dramatically affect the salience of legal status in terms of the well-being and belonging of immigrants. They demonstrate that key local institutions, such as schools, social service agencies, medical clinics, and local organizations, can play pivotal roles for migrants, despite one's legal status (see also Gonzales 2016). At the local level, social networks and community-based organizations (CBOs) can deeply influence immigrant belonging. For example, community organizations can play an intermediary role in helping support and provide access to education, mental health, and legal services (Rusch et al. 2020). Similarly, local public employees can determine the outcomes of government programs and access to related benefits or sanctions (Lipsky 1980). Finally, community organizations and immigrant social networks can help build social capital, and assist immigrants in managing the challenges of daily life, helping them formally and informally find work, navigate social services, and access resources and information for themselves and their families (Menjívar et al. 2016; Gomberg-Muñoz 2017).

The second level of analysis is more at the individual level and focuses on identification and emotional attachment (Yuval-Davis 2006). Here, the focus is on the interaction of socially determined boundaries of social location and the process of boundary-making by the subjects themselves. At this level, "identity" is both individual and collective, and there is necessarily both a cognitive and emotional element. Yuval-Davis (2006, p. 202) emphasizes that identification and belonging are particularly dynamic, and at the subject level, it is a feeling and desire, namely "always a combined process of being and becoming, belonging and longing to belong". Belonging at the level of identity is also performed and collective, connected to repetitive practices—such as participating in cultural or religious events—in specific social and cultural spaces. It is important to note that belonging in terms of social location must be differentiated from belonging in terms of identification and emotional attachment; while the two levels are connected, they are not identical, and these differences highlight the dynamic processes of boundary or group-making, as well as the struggles of groups to resist externally defined boundaries and exclusions, as well as the internalization of such forced constructions. This second level of identification and emotional attachment helps make room for agency and boundary making, and struggles to define "belonging" by subjects and groups themselves.

The third level of analysis of belonging is ethical and political values, or how social locations and constructions of identity are valued and judged. It is here that Yuval-Davis focuses on the "politics of belonging" or the "dirty work" of defining the political meanings

of “us” versus “them”. Her analysis of belonging, here, is akin to the work of other scholars of social boundaries, who focus on the salience of boundaries, their permeability, and how—and by whom—they are produced and reproduced (Wimmer 2013; Lamont and Molnar 2002). For Yuval-Davis, who focuses on the politics of belonging for immigrants in Britain, the focus is primarily on the politics of citizenship, or who is “deserving” of full membership. As she notes, “contemporary debates on the politics of belonging surround the question of who belongs and who does not, and what are the minimum common grounds—in terms of origin, culture and normative behavior . . . what is required from a specific person for him/her to be entitled to belong, to be considered as belonging, to the collectivity” (Yuval-Davis 2006, pp. 207, 209). Through these “politics of belonging”—while some actors and institutions help reinforce boundaries and exclusions of immigrants, other actors and organizations can work towards a “fully permeable politics of belonging” or the ability of some, such as immigrants, to create their own sense of belonging, while also becoming accepted as full members of the broader group (i.e., “citizens”), deserving of the full slate of both rights and responsibilities (Yuval-Davis 2006, p. 213). Others hoping to understand the immigrant experience in the United States in order to better assist them have similarly noted the need to examine the multiple levels of belonging and the dynamics of such politics: “Efforts to welcome immigrants and give them a chance to establish roots, therefore, while they must understand the consequences of federal level immigration policies, must also centrally consider the complex local level realities within which immigrants navigate daily life and produce meaning” (Abrego and Schmalzbauer 2018, p. 16). This article seeks to examine one such case of “local level realities” and the ways that immigrant families and providers of services navigate and help construct particular local politics of belonging.

2. Materials, Methods, and Context

For the “We Belong” project detailed here, the research team employed a novel, critical community-engaged method, called community-initiated student-engaged research (CISER). The CISER model builds on a public scholarship approach, combining collaborative campus-community partnerships with the training and involvement of undergraduate students, particularly those from under-represented groups with lived experiences concerning the social issues being investigated (Greenberg et al. 2020; Fine and Torre 2019; da Cruz 2017). Our study went through rigorous ethics review by the Human Subjects Review Committee of the Institutional Review Board at UC Santa Cruz and received full approval for two separate protocols (UCSC IRB Protocol #3639 and Protocol #3567) pertaining to our two study populations: immigrant and mixed-status family members and immigrant service providers, respectively.

Our community-initiated approach begins with listening to our local partner organization. In this case, our founding partner organization was the Thriving Immigrants Collaborative, based in a primarily immigrant-serving community group, the Community Action Board of Santa Cruz County (CAB). CAB is steeped in the daily work of addressing local social and economic challenges through a network of non-profit resource centers and advocacy strategies. In these years prior to our project, activists and providers in these networks were organized to address rapidly changing federal policies, and were especially concerned about a lack of systematic data on immigrant families of mixed legal status, a vulnerable population who are often hesitant to respond to government researchers and thus deemed “hard to reach”. As our community partners expressed, the lack of data, including census under-counting, meant that these families were often overlooked and underserved. Furthermore, changing policies and other contextual factors during this time were impacting the organizations that served immigrants, as well as the workers within them who were members of immigrant families themselves. Notably, in 2017 and 2018, communities and organizations were thrown into upheaval by pre-dawn ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) raids in neighborhoods that broke down doors and windows. Between 2017 and 2020, rescission of DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals)

and the elimination of existing residency for many Central American residents under Temporary Protected Status destabilized lives, families, and communities. In 2019 and 2020, the announcement of new “public charge” policies (later ruled inadmissible) kept mixed status families from accessing services or resources. In this context, organizations worked overtime to respond in new ways. For instance, in North County, there were no legal aid services for immigrants; in South County, these services were underfunded and overwhelmed by clients from surrounding communities and counties. The We Belong Collaborative was formed in this context. As community engaged researchers, we created a design that aimed to improve publicly accessible, useful data on a significant and under-represented part of our county, and to contribute to coordinated efforts for a more inclusive, healthier county.

The CISER approach also trains and involves a large number of undergraduates, in part to help to scale up data collection. Data were collected by faculty- and graduate-student-supervised teams of undergraduate student researchers enrolled in upper-division classes in field research classes or participating in internships at UC Santa Cruz. In addition to the diverse students who gravitate toward the undergraduate research courses and constituted a significant portion of the research, we chose to recruit student researchers who were themselves from immigrant and under-represented backgrounds (our public university is one of the few Research 1 universities in the United States that is also a Hispanic Serving Institution). Thus, the majority of those who participated and who helped develop the instruments, conduct and transcribe the interviews, and participate in the analysis identified as Latiné and a significant portion came from mixed-status families and/or had a Spanish-speaking background. Students who attach with the Latiné immigrant community find that their differences in positionalities, upbringings, and disciplines are critical assets for building on the themes of belonging and not belonging among providers in Santa Cruz County. Through the CISER process, students transition from colleagues to compañerxs, developing aspirations of placing immigrant families’ voices at the forefront of research (Anzaldúa and Keating 2002). Our students are also from across the state of California, and while a majority are first-generation college students and identify as Latiné, few are actually from the immediate surrounding community. Thus, for many, their participation in our collective project has, in itself, helped create a sense of “belonging” and connection with both fellow students and with the local Latiné community. Our reflexive approach, attentive to who researchers are, how they are perceived, and how their positionalities impact the research process, helps address Small’s (2015) concerns for “de-exoticizing” marginalized groups and Rios’ concerns for “de-colonizing the White space” of research (2015). It also follows May and May and Pattillo-McCoy’s (2000) “collaborative ethnography” approach to developing diverse research teams with different positionalities and “minimal distance” between researchers and research subjects to allow for smoother access, ensure linguistic and culturally competencies, build trust, and garner richer data (see also Enriquez 2020).

In the We Belong Collaborative, we decided on a dual approach that aimed to increase relevant participation in the project and to reveal different dimensions of immigrant experiences in our county. We combined the CISER approach with an asset-based community development approach that had been evolving as part of a small-cohort service-learning program at one of our university’s residential colleges (the Community-based Action Research and Advocacy or CARA Program of Oakes College). The CARA Program, designed to address the strengths and interests of first-generation students, developed a research method and a “power source and barrier” analytical system for a Community Mapping course (Kretzmann and McKnight 1993; Mathie and Cunningham 2003; Delgado and Humm-Delgado 2013). These qualitative, multi-perspectival research techniques especially emphasize collective process, such as focus groups, participatory analysis cycles, and the ongoing improvement of instruments and analytical frameworks based on partner consultation. Our approach used the “mapping” methods to develop stronger relationships with provider and advocacy organizations throughout the county; to create interactive research–analysis cycles to maximize their expertise and raise the profile of the project

over time; and to develop trust that would support broader community outreach and in-depth individual interviews with members of mixed-status families. In each phase, these methods were designed to connect project participants with each other in collaborative and empowering ways with community members and students so as to collect evidence of community cultural wealth by gathering immigrant counter-stories (Yosso 2005).

In the first phase of research, we used individual interviews and focus groups involving front-line social service providers, led by our co-PI and undergraduate researchers. The focus group approach, in particular, was intended to support organizational networking, by bringing together people from advocacy organizations to share perspectives, to continually inform our understanding, and to be attentive to power imbalances between researchers and research subjects (Delgado and Humm-Delgado 2013). We also chose to focus on local immigrant advocates and social service providers in large part because previous research has pointed to the importance of immigrant social and organizational infrastructure having critical roles in building social capital and fostering (or inhibiting) immigrant belonging and well-being (Abrego and Schmalzbauer 2018; Bloemraad et al. 2020; De Graauw 2016; Cheong 2006; Garcia 2019; Gomberg-Muñoz 2017) and partly because an emergent field of study emphasizes that the identities, practices, and experiences of the immigrant-identified workers who act as “cultural brokers” in these roles are part of the immigrant community story themselves, while influencing outcomes strategically for others (López-Sanders 2017; Martínez-Cosío and Iannacone 2007). We were interested in drawing out feelings, practices, and visions for collective action that might help illuminate patterns of generational and strategic change in our county. We sought participants who worked in a variety of roles and organizations and in different parts of the county; and we were attentive to narratives that might indicate immigrant providers’ and advocates’ sense of belonging and power at their organization, as well as in the larger community context. For example, besides themselves, how many Latinè employees or Spanish speakers worked at their organization or institution? How did they describe their job roles as well as their driving motivations? Over a two-year period, we collected 22 individual advocate interviews and five focus group interviews with an average of five advocates per group (26 total respondents—one focus group was conducted mostly in Spanish and another used translanguaging to bridge English- and Spanish-speaking participants). About 60% of the providers were female, representing both immigrant and non-immigrant identities. Our participants were lawyers, health workers, teachers, activists, organizational leaders, program coordinators, and more. Participation was, of course, voluntary, which eventually shaped our data to reflect a subset of providers that may have been more strongly motivated by advocacy and less constrained by other factors than the general provider workforce.

In phase two of data collection, the research team focused on conducting in-depth interviews with individuals from immigrant and/or mixed legal-status families, all of whom were Latinè (primarily of Mexican). Fifty-five such interviews were conducted in English or Spanish, depending on the preference of the interviewee. The demographic information were not collected for all interviewees—the pool included respondents identifying as first (22) or second + generation (7), with a variety of legal status backgrounds, from fully undocumented (12) to DACA (3), from Green Card holder (5) to US born citizen (13). Similar to the advocate pool, the family interviewees were mainly female (ca. 60%). We continued our asset-based approach, developing a modular interview guide that drew on a practicum course in Community Research. Attentive to reflexivity, interviews were conducted primarily by trained undergraduate researchers (primarily of immigrant backgrounds) and lasted 30 min to 2 h. Themes or topics discussed varied across interviews, depending on the experiences and interests of interviewees, but included pre-migration and migration experiences, childhood, family life, parenthood, experiences as members of a mixed-legal status family, belonging, integration, marginalization, transnationalism, politics/policy, legality/illegality, education, thriving, work/employment, experiences in local community spaces, and resources (material and social). Interviewees were recruited through publicly posted flyers, referrals from community partner organizations, social ser-

vice provision events (such as food distributions, health, and COVID clinics), other public and organizational events, and through snow-ball sampling. Interviews were conducted one-on-one in person, over the phone, or over an online platform (Zoom).

All interviews and focus groups were fully transcribed in the language they were conducted, and those conducted in Spanish were translated into English.

Data analysis used a consensual qualitative research approach (CQR). CQR is an interdisciplinary, team-science approach that promotes the co-production of knowledge and solidarity across communities through deep reflective conversations on the differences in researcher positionalities (Hill et al. 2005; Tebes 2018). CQR helped connect research team members trained in different disciplines, including psychology, sociology, politics, education, Latin American, and Latino Studies, as well as critical race and ethnic studies. Team members were also able to draw on perspectives from their positionalities and upbringings, which related to the Latiné community through shared marginalized experiences. CQR thus helped facilitate the co-constructing of spaces that uplift and recognize the barriers faced by underrepresented and minoritized communities. The consensus process was most evident during codebook refinement and coding, when research assistants (RA) were trained to be reflexive about potential biases from their positionalities and be aware of differences, which influenced in-depth discussions while helping minimize the biases of any particular individual in the consensus-making process (Hill et al. 2005). Consensus-based data analysis emphasized subjective interpretations of the participant stories through deep reflection and in-depth discussions before reaching a common understanding of the codes, themes, and patterns. This approach was efficient and structured, yet flexible, allowing for meaningful comprehension of the participant's intimate conversations in relation to already written sources (Schreier 2012).

The project's development of six major themes grew from the coding and combined analysis of transcripts from focus groups and interviews with community advocates, organizations, and members of immigrant and mixed-status families. The data analysis team used rigorous, holistic, and consensus-based memoing and coding, combining frequency and thematic analysis with the assistance of qualitative data software (Dedoose). Student analysts engaged in a collaborative back-and-forth process. One team built an umbrella codebook to help document the breadth of experiences of mixed-status families of Santa Cruz County documented in individual interviews. Another drew on annual analysis of provider and advocate research to develop an "assets" and "barrier" system and six most common and consequential factors or themes that had emerged in that data related to belonging or not-belonging/exclusion. The two codebooks were then aligned to allow for an analysis of the patterns the two data subsets had in common.

3. Results

While our final codebook contained dozens of codes or topics raised in the focus groups and individual interviews related to belonging and not-belonging, here, we focus on the six major themes or factors that emerged from a deeper analysis of the codes that were most commonly assigned to both subsets (advocates and mixed-status family members) during this phase of analysis. These themes reflect a focus on "institutional interfaces" that members of the immigrant community were experiencing during this time; and, in alignment with the existing literature on belonging, reflect the centrality of practices (Yuval-Davis 2006) and locality (Abrego and Schmalzbauer 2018; Garcia 2019; Licona and Maldonado 2014), while exploring structural factors important in developing a sense of belonging in the immigrant communities under study. For each of the six major themes (Table 1), we detail those aspects of the theme or factor that tended to promote a sense of belonging, as well as those that tended to promote a sense of non-belonging or outright exclusion. The contribution of the article is rooted in our process, which gives more voice to the experiential subjectivity of the community. The CISER approach fostered a safe interview environment that provided fertile ground for the interviewees to share rich,

personal anecdotes describing the realities of integration, belonging, and not-belonging for immigrants in Santa Cruz County.

Table 1. The Six Main Themes.

Main Themes					
Spaces and Places [3.1]	Legal Issues, Advocacy, and Criminal Justice [3.2]	Economic (In) Security [3.3]	Family, Health, and Well-Being [3.4]	Access to Education [3.5]	Youth and Rising Generations [3.6]

3.1. Spaces and Places

3.1.1. Spaces of Belonging

The concept of belonging is intimately tied to place. The construction of a sense of membership is intertwined with the development of community and an affinity with specific spaces, both natural and built (Nelson and Hiemstra 2008). In fact, our participants often expressed a perceived connection between areas of Santa Cruz County and a sense of exclusion as well as inclusion. Eighty percent (65 out of 81) of our respondents found that places and spaces that are inclusive, supporting, and welcoming were vital for fostering a positive sense of belonging. These can be physical places, such as a city plaza or public park, or spaces of social activity, such as a community or school organization. Respondents felt that having spaces and places in the community that fostered or celebrated shared histories, identities, culture, and/or language made them feel more at home. The activity of community organizations such as clubs, support groups, and churches also plays an integral role in connecting people, providing opportunities to build relationships, and building a sense of shared identity and solidarity. Whether at work, moving through public, or accessing resources and services, it was important for Latiné and immigrant community members in these spaces to interact with someone who shared some of their identities and/or understood the barriers they faced. Community members expressed that they felt more trust in organizations that advocated for them if those advocates shared similar backgrounds as their own. In general, South County, more specifically the city of Watsonville, was described as a place of belonging, mainly due to the presence of an established Spanish-speaking community and “people who look like me”. Some key places or spaces of “belonging” that people repeatedly mentioned included the Watsonville Plaza during the farmers’ market, Ramsey Park, and downtown Watsonville. As for events and organizations that served as key “spaces” of belonging throughout the county, respondents mentioned Watsonville Pride, as well as Senderos and Barrios Unidos in North County.

Pascual is a 52-year-old first-generation naturalized citizen, who moved from Mexico to Watsonville. Pascual, a father of four, describes how his shared cultural practices and identities shaped his sense of belonging in Watsonville with those part of the Latiné/x immigrant community:

“Look in Watsonville, . . . it feels comfortable, and you feel identified because there are a lot of Hispanics . . . there are many people who are from the town where I come from in Mexico. . . . I feel identified and more than anything, because you know the parties that they make, the birthdays, the weddings, that there is a quinceañera, . . . I’m telling you today, I feel identified. I know I’m in the appropriate place and I live comfortably here in Watsonville, even though I’ll tell you, Santa Cruz is prettier. There are more beautiful places, there are more attractions than here in Watsonville. [. . .] But here I feel identified because here are my people, here are the people I come from, right?”

Pascual explained that although Santa Cruz is “nicer”, it does not provide him the same feeling of acceptance that Watsonville does. This demonstrates how an environment where there are groups of people with shared identities and cultures fosters a feeling of warmth and acceptance. In fact, “any understanding of community and affinity with specific landscapes—placemaking— simultaneously constructs a sense of socially recognized

membership” (Nelson and Hiemstra 2008, p. 322). As mentioned, the Watsonville Plaza emerged as the space that most induced a sense of belonging.

The Plaza is associated with belonging because it is the space where community events are held. One community organizer expressed gratitude for having such a Plaza at the heart of downtown, which is uncommon in other cities in the county. Over the years, various organizations have made efforts to foster a sense of community and belonging by hosting diverse events such as performances, poetry readings, theater, and a farmer’s market at the Plaza every Friday. These events contribute to building a strong community and make people feel at ease when visiting the downtown area. This “sense of socially recognized membership” is fostered by the work of local advocacy groups and other community associations that seek to decrease the negative effect of exclusionary practices and policies. In North County, where immigrant communities feel less belonging in general, occasional annual events, such as la Guelaguetza, and particular organizations have created or transformed micro-spaces of belonging in strategically essential ways.

3.1.2. Spaces of Not Belonging

Eighty-five percent (69/80) of the interviewees noted that places where they experienced acts of aggression (insults, racial profiling, or discrimination), or were excluded due to their (or a family member’s) documentation status or racial/ethnic identity, helped create a sense of alienation and exclusion. Generally, numerous institutions, physical places, and social spaces were experienced as hostile or having negative social climates. Illegal status makes community members vulnerable in an environment of hostility. Depending on the space, people who are undocumented may feel more or less secure disclosing and even existing with their documentation status. Depending on their documentation status, some may even avoid having to enter these spaces entirely, especially if they have had traumatic experiences there before. Formal policies related to documentation are not the only practices that hinder the development of the feeling of belonging. Several interviewees described daily (micro)aggressions by locals and institutional racism as upsetting events that make them feel unwelcomed. Respondents mentioned that the northern portions of the country, including the cities of Santa Cruz and Aptos, were associated with non-belonging for immigrants, mainly due to their demographics and several negative interactions with locals. Interviewees mentioned particular places they may have experienced active aggression (e.g., harassment), and some mentioned the changing character of Santa Cruz County and rising gentrification.

Maria is 19 years old and was born and raised in Watsonville, which has a predominantly Latinx population. When she shared her feelings of not belonging, she referred to downtown Santa Cruz—which is predominantly white. Maria recalls Santa Cruz as a place that contributes to feelings of discomfort because of her experiences with acts of aggression in its public spaces.

I: “Is there a place maybe in Watsonville, in Santa Cruz County, that you feel you don’t belong?”

M: “[...] I would say usually [...] just walking around [...] downtown Santa Cruz or, I don’t know what street it is, but it’s where the Penny Ice Creamery is. I don’t know. I just feel really weird. Like they always look at us, the white people, I mean. Me and my mom, [...] we’ll just be walking, and we feel really uncomfortable just- and it’s not even [...] that they say something, it’s just that we’re not used to those kinds of people. And then I know that my mom’s husband has had experiences with racism and stuff there. So whenever we go to downtown Santa Cruz, he doesn’t like coming with us”

Maria mentioned how her family is looked at differently in Santa Cruz because of their darker complexion. As people of color, navigating predominantly white spaces makes her family feel as if they are under surveillance, leaving them feeling susceptible to racial hostility. Memories and stories of individuals experiencing hostile situations serve as reminders to avoid particular spaces and places.

3.2. Legal Issues, Advocacy, and Criminal Justice

3.2.1. Legal Issues, Advocacy, and Criminal Justice and Belonging

Legal status and having access to legal identification were generally positively associated with a sense of belonging. In fact, 94% (76/81) of the interviewees discussed having legal status as a variable of belonging. Here, having documentation status, as well as having access to systems to provide a means of verifiable identification—e.g., consular or driver's license—helped improve stability and access to other aspects of society (such as banking, jobs, housing, phones, and safety). Legal status and access to identification also helped provide stability, strength, confidence, and a sense of belonging in relation to organizations, the local community, and/or the United States.

The importance of legal status as a contributor to belonging can be felt in the quote below. Pascual, also quoted above, moved from Mexico. He described the moment he obtained legal documentation as having a major positive impact on the whole family. In an instant, his family no longer had to fear him facing deportation or experiencing travel limitations.

P: “[...] I remember I was working in the flower shop when my wife came with, [my two kids]. They came to my job, and I remember ... [they were] very happy, “Pa! Pa!” she said, “we’re going to Mexico! We’re going to be able to go to Mexico” very happy. I said, “Why?” she said, “look what arrived for you!” It was my resident card. ... [They were] very happy because they knew what all that meant, ... for all of us, not just for them, not just for myself, that it was for them too”.

I: “And how did you feel at that moment?”.

P: “Well, from that moment I said, my fears of... immigration are over. Now, I’m not going to have that fear that every time I see them, and get nervous, that now I’m going to be able to go to Mexico with my family [...] I’m going to be able to see my parents”.

This excerpt points to the difficulties of keeping a mixed-status family together when one of its members faces travel limitations. Upon receiving legal documentation, Pascual and his family were reassured that he would be welcomed back into the United States if he were to travel to his homeland. Pascual and his family no longer had to live with the fear of deportation or being prohibited from coming back to the United States. Legal status allowed him to keep his family together, find regular employment, and feel part of the local community, without fearing exposure and deportation. By obtaining legal documentation, people can gain a sense of security and express having the right, entitlement, and comfort to call themselves part of America.

The importance of legal recognition is also evident in the case of William, a 22-year-old 1.5-generation undocumented male. William was born in Jalisco and now lives in Santa Cruz County. He and his mom knew of the importance of obtaining protected status under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program (DACA) as it would provide him with educational and employment opportunities, and allow him to develop a position of entitlement and access to other resources. When asked about the first time about how being undocumented affected them, William responded that it was during their freshman year of high school when the future of DACA was uncertain due to President Donald Trump's announcement of ending new applications. William knew the importance of becoming a DACA recipient and gaining access to opportunities not available to undocumented folks. This demonstrates how having access to systems that provide means of verifiable identification and being in the position of having rights in America fosters a sense of acceptance and support.

3.2.2. Legal Issues, Advocacy, and Criminal Justice as Barriers to Belonging

Many respondents talk about the lack of documentation as being extremely exclusionary, preventing individuals from accessing “benefits” such as working in formal and/or public sector jobs, applying for rent support, and accessing childcare and other social services, which was consistent with other studies (Yuval-Davis 2006; Zayas and Gulbas

2017). Indeed, 95% (77/81) of the interviewees mentioned lack of legal status as a negative factor in feeling belonging. Much of this feeling has to do with the anti-immigrant policies pursued by the United States and the consistent threat of deportation from the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). De Genova called this broader socio-political context “the regime of deportability” (De Genova 2006, 2007). It is the constant threat of detention and deportation, not deportation per se, that renders a sense of belonging particularly difficult to achieve (De Genova 2002). Undocumented people in Santa Cruz County fear exposure and deportation, which prevents many from feeling welcomed and as if they belonged. As a local advocate puts it,

“People in our communities stick to our community. We don’t travel out unless we need to. You know, I know for our families... at the site I work at, when the ICE raids first happened, everyone stayed in their houses. No one wanted to come out and so I had to rebuild the trust in the community to go back out. So, I had an immigration lawyer come out and tell them their rights”.

A visceral sense of exclusion was also felt by Wendy, a 17-year-old student born in the U.S. to undocumented immigrant parents. When she was in the third grade, she experienced how legal status can create barriers:

I: “When did you first find out about your family members’ status?”.

W: “... they [family] never told me when I was little. “Oh, we’re immigrants, like, you’re the daughter of immigrant people.” I put it together when we went to Mexico, that’s when we came back, and my mom couldn’t come back with us. That’s kind of when they actually told me, “Oh, well she can’t come back. She doesn’t have papers”. And then they explained the whole situation. So I guess, probably in third grade”.

I: “Was there a specific instance or a moment that you realized that maybe this could affect you somehow?”.

W: “Well, yeah, that exact moment when they told me, they’re like, “Oh, your mom might not be able to come back because she didn’t have papers, and if you don’t have papers you can’t really go through on an airplane or anything”. And so my dad would explain to me how she had to cross the border”.

Many without legal immigration status are forced to limit their trust and mobility. For example, Daisy, a 20-year-old undocumented student, told researchers that being unable to travel with friends and applying to colleges were some of the main barriers faced by those who are undocumented. Daisy shared her status with her best friend, college counselor, and her teachers. Daisy was afraid of revealing her legal status and avoided entering into certain situations because she was aware that her legal status could cause problems. Undocumented people are thus often forced to hide in the shadows, and experience difficulties because of their documentation status, making them feel as if they are excluded and not entitled to basic rights.

3.3. Economic (In) Security

3.3.1. Economic Security and Belonging

Eighty percent (65/80) of the respondents reported that family and community support were key to providing a sense of economic security and belonging. This support is not only monetary, but also includes sharing information and mediation. Local community organizations were seen as crucial because they help gain access to job information, food, and affordable housing, while also advocating for larger social change.

For example, Lorena, a 43-year-old first-generation undocumented woman, first came to Santa Cruz on her own, with the help of her brother, who was already living locally. Settling in Santa Cruz meant she had a place where she was able to give her nephew a sense of safety and comfort by providing him with housing. By allowing her nephew to stay with her, Lorena provides a safe space for her family in order for them to avoid further economic insecurity.

Similarly, Gabi, a 24-year-old second-generation U.S.-born woman who works as a program coordinator, talked about the importance of perseverance and serving as a role model to other youth:

"I would say... , to have the fear and the uncomfortableness [...] not stop you, but fuel you to keep moving forward. [...] I feel that you know, our hustle will be recognized, [...] not only by your family but, you know, [...], by yourself in the near future, when you're able to look back and see all the obstacles that you were able to overcome. [...] and to recognize what you, you were able to achieve and hopefully be a role model to your siblings. And if they don't have siblings, [...] to other youth and to community members that they might interact with".

Economic security can be facilitated through community support and resources. Gabi, who once struggled, graduated from college and is now able to provide assistance to youth in the community, such as sharing information about community programs that provide support to youth. Gabi is able to provide these economic resources in order to help those in her community feel a sense of belonging.

3.3.2. Economic Insecurity

Not having legal documentation, as well as the related barriers to obtaining it, are described as the main cause of exclusion, as they preclude community members from having many rights, and access to positions that could grant them economic security. Illegal status is exclusionary not only because it prevents access to opportunities, but also because it exacerbates the fear of repercussions from state institutions and other societal actors. Economic insecurity was cited by 86% (70/81) of interviewees as connected to feelings of exclusion from the community.

The impact of the lack of economic opportunities is evident in the experiences of Vinnie, a 16-year-old first-generation, undocumented student. Vinnie put much effort into becoming recognized for his academic abilities and had some success creating a sense of belonging at school. Nevertheless, due to his lack of legal documentation, he was limited to certain jobs, such as cleaning houses, leading to economic insecurity and feelings of non-belonging.

Not only do undocumented immigrants have limited opportunities for jobs, but they also face the fear of legal repercussions, which can cause them to feel stuck in their situation. For example, William, a 22-year-old, 1.5-generation undocumented immigrant who works in the HVAC industry, explained how a lack of documentation status could lead to labor exploitation. William often felt discriminated against or treated differently because of his ethnicity, which sometimes resulted in not receiving the full payment for a job. The situation was complicated by the fact that he had to work under a fake name because of his undocumented status. The contractors may not have known about the fake name, but they could tell he was Mexican, which may have influenced their treatment of him. William's situation reflects the reality that many undocumented workers in the U.S. face. Because of his documentation status, William was unwilling to fight for the money he was entitled to, due to fear of legal repercussions.

3.4. Family, Health, and Well-Being

3.4.1. Family, Health, and Well-Being and Belonging

The health and well-being of immigrant families are also deeply tied to feelings of belonging. Feeling welcomed and included by community members and key community organizations increases access to health services and support. Ninety-five percent (77/81) of the respondents mentioned these practices of welcoming and belonging as being connected to health and well-being. Some interviewees also reported that being excluded made them feel more resolved and willing to overcome barriers and seek out community and resources to improve their family's health and well-being. Local immigrant advocates shared insights on how belonging is fostered through advocacy and cultural practices transmitted through familial and community networks. Building belonging is described

as the sum of a panoply of acts ranging from identifying barriers (i.e., things that produce feelings of NOT belonging) to helping the community build bridges across said barriers. Ester's comment exemplifies the inclusive practices adopted by some advocates:

"As a community advocate that works for family services, I always like to welcome families and, you know, talk to our families in their native language, making them feel welcome, making them feel like they belong. So I think it's very important as a community member to, whenever . . . we are hosting a meeting, . . . being able to encourage that, . . . say, like, "Oh, Si no lo puede expresar en inglés, se puede expresar en Spanglish o, este español." You know, just make them feel welcome because that really makes a difference when someone feels welcome".

"The ultimate goal of creating these healthy conversations is to get something good out of it for the greater benefit of the community".

Whether offering a safe space, providing tools, serving as a messenger, or working alongside other members, advocates play a crucial role in creating a space for the community to flourish. Organizations support families by offering legal help, seeking to increase equity within the school system, and/or gathering resources to meet basic needs such as room and board. Many advocates say their goal is to co-create a healthy community with all the other partners and allies. In doing so, they are at the forefront of building belonging in Santa Cruz County's immigrant community. Members of local immigrant families definitely express the importance of familial support to families' well-being. For example, Ana, a 42-year-old first-generation undocumented woman, chose to move to Santa Cruz because her brother had already moved there years prior. As she explains in the quote below, having familial support increased the access to resources for individuals to meet their social needs and develop a sense of belonging. For a family's well-being to be met, other factors are required, such as having support, access to resources, and secure jobs and housing. Having these needs met positively contributes to a family's health and well-being.

I: "Do you feel that you have more or fewer opportunities living in Santa Cruz as opposed to other families that live in other places?"

A: "I'm going, to be honest, I don't know because I came to Santa Cruz from Mexico, and I've only lived here. What I do feel is that the people I know here already have a lot of families elsewhere, so when you get to your family, . . . they tell you "Don't worry, come here with us, and I'll help you find work." [. . .] So then it's not really the place. It's the families that are already established in a place".

Being a part of a community can connect families to other resources. As Ana explained, for immigrant families having family already established, no matter where they reside, can help create connections. These connections can be work-related, housing-related, or simply being a part of a safe community that helps ease the emotional burden of moving to a new location.

The importance of having a community is felt in the quote below from Perla, a 20-year-old 1.5-generation undocumented woman with undocumented parents. Perla and her family moved to Santa Cruz because she had an uncle already residing there. Growing up, both her parents were always working, leaving her and her sister to take care of themselves. Having a safety net provided her with a sense of security and reassurance to seek help if needed.

P: "Since we were little, there was a list of names and numbers we have of friends in case we ever get home and [our parents] are not here, and [our parents] don't come back. Cause, sometimes we get home, and they weren't there because they were at work. But if, like, if we went home and they didn't come back, we would have to call my uncle or one of their friends to come to pick us up and then try to figure out what the plan was going to be from there. But we did have, I guess, people who, we knew, if my sister and I were left here alone, we could go to them and stay there".

Relying on familial support is a reality for many immigrant families. For families with undocumented members, there is a fear of being separated, as well as fearing what will happen to the other family members. This ongoing, lingering fear can create barriers to wellness and health for immigrant families. Having procedures or plans in place in case a family member is separated, such as the one Perla mentioned, can help mitigate some of these fears. Given the situation of these families, having community support is integral to wellness and health.

3.4.2. Barriers to Family, Health, and Well-being

Documentation status and not having rights and entitlements were reported as major obstacles preventing access to health services. These two issues were reported a total of 609 times in our interviews. The interviewees also mentioned experiencing environments of hostility, coldness, suspicion, a sense of vulnerability, and surveillance that negatively affected their well-being as a whole. The effects of documentation status on the well-being of families can be felt through the quote below. Wilma is an 18-year-old first generation undocumented immigrant with DACA. She is part of a mixed-status family who live in Santa Cruz. While she is a full-time student with a part-time job, she faced challenges while applying to schools due to her and her family's documentation status. Wilma mentioned that her status gave her the opportunity to apply for DACA, which helped her a lot individually. However, during her college process, she had to be careful about what information she divulged, especially when it came to her mom's social security number. Her counselor advised her to put a specific number, but when she sent proof of her mom's taxes, the social security number was different, which became a problem.

Wilma's story shows why documentation status was repeatedly named a barrier to a family's well-being. Worrying about the information she gave out about her mother added an extra layer of stress to the already stressful college application process, as well as limited the opportunities for higher education. The lack of rights as an undocumented individual can create a fearful and hostile environment that can change how individuals participate in society. As recent scholarship on immigrant health has shown, racialized legal status can have a strong impact on immigrants' health through increased stress levels, experiences of discrimination, and willingness and ability to access care (Bacong and Menjivar 2021).

Barriers to feelings of belonging are also evident in the quote below from Wendy, 17-years old, born in the U.S. and currently living in Watsonville. She is the daughter of undocumented immigrants, and their documentation status made it difficult when trying to find places to live. She said the following:

"We've usually lived in, like, small studios and stuff. Like, my parents have always wanted a house, but they have to ... build credit for that and [...] it was hard for them to build credit [...] they don't have papers, [...] it's hard for them to make more money, to be able to afford a house because they can't get better jobs".

Wendy's situation also shows documentation status' impact on a family's well-being. Although she is a U.S. citizen, coming from a mixed-status family can still create barriers. In Wendy's case, it caused her parents to have fewer opportunities to have higher paying jobs, which in turn made it difficult to find housing. Their documentation status also made it difficult to build credit, which is essential to finding housing. Difficulty meeting basic needs, such as reliable housing or a livable income, can harm a person's well-being as it creates a constantly stressful environment.

3.5. Access to Education

3.5.1. Access to Education

Interviewees described learning institutions in a positive manner when the school's community and its curriculum accurately reflect immigrant culture, demystify immigration issues, help orient students, and facilitate belonging. In fact, among the economic and institutional systems discussed in our interviews, access to education is the most prominent. Institutions with programs supporting all their students establish healthy learning com-

munities that foster belonging. The importance of having access to supportive programs within a school setting is shown in the quote below from Diana, a 19-year-old U.S.-born female, and full-time student:

D: “[...] I was in this club that’s called the Migrant Student Association Club.[...] And they helped me throughout the whole process and I’m actually pretty grateful for them because I feel like if I didn’t know them or, like, was so close to them, I probably wouldn’t have, like, any clue as to where to start. But, [...], they helped me with my applications, reviewed them, and stuff like that. So yeah, I think that’s, they were the biggest help”.

Here, Diana expressed the importance of having access to supportive programs in high school, something that inevitably made college a possibility. She explained that the program, focusing on migrant students and children of migrant workers, gave her a space to feel that she was able to accomplish completion and continue with the college application process. Being able to successfully complete a college application process is something Diana could not have access to without the support of these programs. Programs such as these, which advance student academic careers, are vital for feeling belonging and a sense of autonomy in that educational process.

The importance of having support and being celebrated within a school setting is felt in the quote below. Vinnie is a 16-year-old first-generation undocumented student. For him, having a support system allowed him to have a positive school experience.

L: “[...] I got into high school, and a lot of teachers recognized me for my hard work, which was amazing. It was nice hearing them talk about me in a good way, unlike other students that I saw that were struggling academically. And you know it really helped me improve and really helped me understand how important it is for my family and for me to have a good academic life. [...] I wouldn’t have taken in every opportunity if it wasn’t for the support groups that I had in school, and if it wasn’t for the way that my parents taught me to be and act. I wouldn’t have a good relationship with my teachers, and I wouldn’t have had such an amazing time in school and enjoyed it so much”.

Here, Vinnie highlighted the importance of school involvement for furthering student education. As Vinnie is an undocumented first-generation student, he expressed the ways he was able to have access to education and educational equity through school faculties, which are vital to student academic success. Because Vinnie was able to have a community of different organizations and faculty, this created a space for Vinnie to feel as though he belonged through inclusion practices. This had a positive impact on this educational success, as creating a space for Vinnie to belong also furthered his educational goals.

3.5.2. Barriers to Access to Education

Lack of documentation and rights are an exclusionary variable when schools and other systems do not provide immigrant community members with relevant ways to access education. Schools that create an environment of hostility, including a sense of coldness, suspicion, vulnerability, and surveillance, were also reported as places of not belonging. The effects of being undocumented in a school setting is shown below with Pascual, a 52-year-old first-generation immigrant. He is currently an American citizen. However, while undocumented, he faced exclusion from some jobs and from receiving higher education because of his status. Pascual voiced an important point about how people without permanent documentation face an inability to receive equal access to education compared with those with documentation. Most impactfully, he highlighted the dismissal of educational equity for undocumented students, something that is an all too common occurrence. Without achieving his educational goals, Pascual was then limited in the types of positions he could receive adequate pay for, creating an even more insidious barrier that promoted the notion of not belonging.

Similarly, the quote below demonstrates how documentation status contributes to feelings of not belonging in an academic setting. Devon, a 16-year-old, U.S.-born high

school student shared a story of how being of mixed status affected his parents' abilities to participate in school activities, leading to negative emotions.

D: "[...] If you wanted to volunteer, you needed to get your fingerprints, and you needed to have like certain things. And [...], whenever I would bring it up to my parents, they, they never wanted to be a volunteer [...] because they didn't have papers and, you know [...], at some point, both of them were like detained by ICE. So they were afraid and like, you know, to have their fingerprints taken and everything. So they always told me no.[...] That's when I really realized the overall immigration status place in my life and their lives. Yeah. Like the impact on it".

Here, Devon expressed aspects of not belonging with access to education through the ways in which he experienced life in a mixed-status family. Devon stated being unable to feel he had equal opportunities in his school specifically because of the barrier of his family's status. Having a space for education and learning was not of equal access to Devon, especially when involving direct policies that schools enforce.

3.6. Youth and Rising Generations

3.6.1. Youth and Rising Generation and Belonging

Youth experience a sense of belonging with the help of and participation in community organizations such as NGOs, clubs, social organizations, political groups, and churches, which help create connections to the rest of the community. Being directly involved in building community spaces and organizations, and developing immigrant/community leadership also creates a positive sense of belonging in young people. This is palpable when considering that, here, community was the most mentioned means to enhance connectivity and belonging. Youth leadership goes beyond empowering the leaders themselves, it also creates a safe space of belonging where they can lead by example, paving the way for future generations. The role that community organizations play in fostering a sense of belonging among youth through community support can be felt in the words of Vinnie, a 16-year-old, first-generation undocumented student. He was born in Mexico City and now lives in Santa Cruz. Through the community-based organization Senderos, he was able to create a sense of belonging and obtain a support system. For Vinnie, being a first-generation student was hard enough, but it became more noticeably difficult as an undocumented student. He often faced bullying in school, hindering his ability to have school be a safe space for him. After finding a youth-led community organization that he identified with through Senderos, Vinnie was able to feel a sense of belonging, which ultimately furthered his educational goals.

The importance for youth to have access to resources is felt in the quote below from Daisy, a 20-year-old 1.5-generation undocumented female who attends Cabrillo College. By opening up and being vulnerable, she was able to access resources that provided her with safe spaces and support.

I: "What kind of advice would you give somebody from a similar background as you, living in Santa Cruz or a student navigating, [...] Santa Cruz public schools as, [...], an undocumented person".

D: "[...] I am sounding cheesy, but that they're not alone. There were a lot of times when I felt like nobody knew what I was going through. Nobody understood, but I had to do everything by myself. But by opening up a little bit, I was able to find resources from staff from schools, dance groups, organizations, and just people who had been through the same thing. I once told them, "Hey, I'm undocumented, they'll be like, you know what? Me too. This is a place where I can get help. Then you can get help too". So just knowing that you're not alone and not being afraid to ask people for help".

Here, Daisy highlighted the community aspects that she felt supported her as an undocumented student. Citing resources that she was able to access, including youth-centered organizations, Daisy was able to have a sense of community. This sense of

community ultimately aided Daisy's journey as an undocumented student by being a source of motivation, as she is now doing the same for others that are undocumented.

3.6.2. Barriers to Youth and Rising Generation

Youth experience not belonging or exclusion in environments of hostility and where they lack connections and relationships with major institutions such as schools, universities, or the government. It is striking that, here, more than 25% of all conversations about alienation featured institutions as exclusionary actors. The lack of documentation and rights is an exclusionary variable for the youth as well. The relationship between youth and exclusion as an undocumented immigrant is shown in the quote below by Marina, a 38-year-old first generation immigrant from Mexico. She was previously undocumented but is now a legal resident. In her adolescence, she faced exclusion from institutions due to her documentation status.

I: "Do you think your resident status influences your identity?"

M: "Ahhh, well... Yes. Still yes, because when you're undocumented, when I landed here, I was undocumented—I was already going to turn 19, from 19 to 23. uh, like at 24 because I went back to Mexico. Those years that I was like that without papers, ah, I couldn't work... had no benefits, almost nothing. [...], I couldn't have the Medi-Cal either. Many things are against you when you are undocumented, and when you have your residency well, you have more support. Yes, and it's like it's a support for you, for your person".

Here, Marina expressed the ways she experiences exclusion as an undocumented immigrant. Specifically, Marina discussed the ways in which she was not even able to apply for work positions, let alone be hired for one. These barriers for undocumented people not only harm their feeling of belonging and worth through equal access to resources, but impact their children immensely as undocumented status limits access to medical care.

Ana is a 42-year-old first-generation undocumented immigrant and a mother. She spoke of how documentation status can hinder and create obstacles to feelings of belonging due to not being able to create connections with institutions.

A: "[...] having papers in this country [...] that's the American dream! Not to have a house or car or money but be able to have papers and work well and be able to move with security, and that you're not going to be afraid that if you're stopped by the police, they are going to take away your car and the dream I think is having papers and being able to travel and move with the confidence that one can move around with. And it is a great disadvantage and something that stops you and stops you from being able to do things to progress or to obtain something".

Here, Ana highlighted the ways in which connections with institutions are what creates opportunities for people, and those that do not have institutional connections, such as first-generation undocumented immigrants, are instead subjected to exclusion. This relates to youth and the rising generation, because Ana did not have access to the same opportunities as others, which limited which jobs she was able to obtain. As documentation status is necessary for things such as owning property, having access to education, and receiving medical care, undocumented individuals are not given a chance for support and, ultimately, success.

4. Discussion

This study is part of a larger community-initiated student-engaged research (CISER) project, We Belong: Collaboration for Community Engaged Research and Immigrant Justice. This research model is designed to include and examine the experiences of multiple actors in connection with immigrant communities and mixed-status families of Santa Cruz County (Greenberg et al. 2020). As a result, our findings indicate that the inclusion of multiple perspectives creates an opportunity for identifying how we can better support and learn from immigrants navigating complex barriers that impact their physical and psychological

sense of belonging. Our research findings support and expand upon existing literature by demonstrating how the inclusion of multiple perspectives, consideration of intersectional identities, and examination of various social locations and institutions can contribute to a comprehensive understanding of immigrant belonging. By identifying environments of hostility and exploring the ways in which immigrants facilitate their own conditions of belonging, we provide insights into how to better support and learn from immigrants navigating complex barriers to belonging in Santa Cruz County. In addition, our results reinforce and expand on Yuval-Davis's (2006) "politics of belonging" to identify how social constructs such as citizenship status can provide forms of physical and psychological safety and security through inclusion or a sense of insecurity and exclusion among immigrant communities in the United States. Our findings align with the understanding that belonging encompasses both individual-level emotional attachment and broader connections to the social and physical world (Evaristo 2017; Zayas and Gulbas 2017). At the social location level, our study highlights that citizenship status, particularly for immigrant populations, acts as a dominant social location or master status that significantly influences overall social positioning (Yuval-Davis 2006; Gonzales 2016). Immigrants' legal or undocumented status can produce fear, anxiety, and vulnerability to exploitation, affecting their sense of belonging and well-being (Abrego 2015; De Genova 2002).

In combination, by taking Abrego and Schmalzbauer's (2018) Social Locations into perspective, we advanced in pinpointing environments of hostility that can inhibit one's sense of belonging, while simultaneously highlighting how immigrants facilitate their own conditions of belonging on a personal, communal, and institutional level. Furthermore, our study emphasizes the role of institutions at various levels in enforcing and reproducing boundaries of belonging. Nation-state institutions, as arbiters and enforcers of citizenship status, hold significant power in determining belonging and well-being (Abrego 2015). Additionally, regional and local institutions, such as schools, social service agencies, medical clinics, community organizations, and local organizations, play crucial roles in shaping immigrant belonging (Abrego and Schmalzbauer 2018; Gonzales 2016; Rusch et al. 2020). These institutions can either facilitate or hinder access to resources, services, and support systems, affecting immigrants' overall sense of belonging. We recognize the role of community organizations and immigrant social networks in supporting immigrants and helping them navigate daily challenges, access resources, find work, and create a sense of community (Menjívar et al. 2016). In this respect, we concur with other studies that have similarly found that Latiné immigrants draw, and often depend, on the social capital of their co-ethnic community to help survive often-harsh treatment and structural forms of exclusion (Abrego and Schmalzbauer 2018; Gonzales 2016; Gomberg-Muñoz 2017). Local public employees also play a significant role in determining immigrants' access to government programs and related benefits or sanctions (Lipsky 1980). With the support of multiple theoretical frameworks, we ensured immigrant experiences in relation to belonging were analyzed with the utmost consideration of their intersectional identities when navigating different places and spaces in Santa Cruz County.

4.1. Interactions within Themes

Even though the results of this community-engaged research project are analytically categorized into the following six themes, spaces and places [3.1]; legal issues, advocacy, and criminal justice [3.2]; economic (in)security [3.3]; family, health, and well-being [3.4]; access to education [3.5]; and youth and rising generations [3.6], it is important to be mindful of the numerous and intricate connections between each of them. Our findings suggest that providers must consider the spectrum of inhibitors and facilitators of belonging to either change forces of not belonging or reinforce systems of belonging that impact immigrant experiences on a personal, interpersonal, and institutional level. For example, the theme "legal issues, advocacy, and criminal justice" can represent the job (in)accessibility due to work requirements, such as forms of documentation/identification. As emphasized by our participants, these requirements hinder immigrant communities' access to employment.

This barrier may lead to job (in)security, which then impacts a person's economic in/security. These institutional barriers create a ricochet effect that transcends beyond one individual and can either negatively or positively affect a "families/communities, health, and well-being"—such as their experience with food, housing, health care, and family separations. While the barriers discussed above create an environment of non-belonging, immigrant communities have simultaneously created a sense of belonging through exclusion. For example, we found that a sense of community through group identity and cultural pride may be developed or strengthened in instances of exclusion from dominant groups. This response can then facilitate one's ability to navigate environments/experiences of hostility. Immigrant experiences are not static and are, in fact, nuanced in their interconnectedness with inhibitors and facilitators of belonging. Gaining a deeper understanding of how and why immigrant communities respond to forces that either push them out or push them through barriers will provide a deeper consciousness for those who do not share intersectional identities with the immigrant communities actively navigating Santa Cruz County and beyond. The six themes are intended to be in conversation with one another, to understand that immigrant communities are actively maneuvering past multiple forces that impact their sense of belonging.

4.2. On Culture, Language, and Practices of Belonging

Some of the most impactful, ground-breaking, and hopeful findings of our study have yet to be formally coded, analyzed, and articulated. Still pending for further analysis are important themes in culture and language policy, identity, and practice. In many of the interviews and focus groups, participants identified cultural and language ideologies or experiences as barrier situations, but they also articulated important and empowering insights, intentional practices, and ways of being in the world as essential for creating community and making change for themselves and each other. Powerfully, participants shared stories and philosophies that illustrated a "culture of solidarity" within institutional spaces; as ways of brokering or responding and opening doors for others; and as ways of thinking and acting with each other as ways to be community on a daily basis and over time. It is clear that these arts of "being and making community" are connected with people's "sense of community", as referenced in this article.

From the outset, all of our researchers were committed to drawing out cultural strengths and stories that emphasized community strategies for pushing back fear or prejudice, and building strength and the power to prevail and develop—as individuals, families, and communities. Among the most exciting aspects of the data as a whole is this potential to name these factors in new and useful ways.

Yet, we realized, first of all, that the dearth of information in our county about lived experiences of immigrant communities, especially during this critical time of policy-change, obliged us to follow through as soon as possible on our commitment to creating useful data. Second, as we coded, we realized that although these cultural strategies or dimensions of belonging and exclusion were pervasive and extremely rich, they were not easy to trace in existing literature or public discourse. For this reason and others, they were not easy to code.

As a starting point or bookmark toward further analysis of cultural practices that shape belonging, we would like to note the pervasive importance of "language". If legal citizenship is a "master status", language is both a "tool of tools" and a meta-medium for many other community strategies. Part of the reason it is difficult to code "language" as a theme is that it is so pervasive, intersubjective, and unbounded. This data would require robust analytical criteria in socio-linguistics intersecting with both institutional and community resistance theory to guide inquiry into language as a multivalent field of social power. Similar to other "sites" where rituals of belonging and exclusion take place, language encounters operate on multiple levels of emotion and memory to construct complex identities that are always simultaneously about both (Plascencia 2012). Stories of mistreatment, struggle, dedication, and overcoming related to culture and identity were

especially noteworthy as examples of how exclusion from a powerful or dominant group can forge people's identity of resistance and belonging to an excluded community.

Participants identified institutionalized language ideology (hierarchies), language policy, language identity as a proxy for race, racialized language incidents, and language access as barrier features, especially in schools and health systems. One of the most commonly identified experiences was an overwhelming sense of ignorance or empty space where awareness of world languages should be, which constituted *de facto* erasure of the immigrant experience.

Nearly welded to these stories, on the other hand, were stories of language strategy, resistance, pride, overcoming, learning, accessing, reaching out, bonding, and making new pathways—including their decisions to participate in our study—so that newcomers or younger generations would not have to suffer as they did. Unlike federal policy, language is one of the cultural arts within reach of ordinary people. Participants further made the distinction between the importance of linguistic competencies (such as skills in Spanish and Mexican indigenous languages), which not everyone can have, and the ways that people speak to each other when they are “being community” or “attending” a member of the public. These dimensions of the data have considerable potential for contributing to cross-sectoral studies on race, ethnicity, and inclusive policy, as well as community organizing practice. On a broader level, they could improve understandings of cultural practices as resistance and transformation.

4.3. Discussion on the Interaction between Family and Advocates

The results tell us detailed stories of belonging and the lack thereof, while also underlining the perspectives of immigrant families and advocates of services to immigrants. The outcomes can help us paint a clearer picture of the environment in which immigrant communities exist and act, and where advocates can step in to help immigrants' sense of belonging. According to our data collection, advocates make sense of belonging in similar ways to the immigrant families; after all, some of them share similar backgrounds with the family interviewees. Yet, given their training and professional experiences, they speak about belonging in a community-centered perspective, in other words, they focus on community integration efforts. Advocates discuss belonging as very connected to the work of and involvement in community organizations. Advocates seem also to focus more on accessing housing, and thus on being able to set deeper roots in the community, as a condition to increase belonging.

From a bird-eye-view, our interviewees seem to be aware of the importance of access to specific systems that improve the quality of life and foster integration in the community. We can see how accessing food is equally mentioned as a central to feeling part of the community by both immigrant families and advocates. Besides being a human necessity, food is described by many interviewees as an integral part of immigrant culture and a vehicle for building belonging. Yet, our data show that, while focusing on similar themes, the immigrant families often discussed issues from a different perspective than the advocates. For example, both our groups of interviewees discussed how school curricula play a big role in integrating immigrant children through programs that can range from Spanish speaking classes to cultural events. On the other hand, our analysis shows that immigrant families were much more likely to discuss access to education as being central to their feeling of belonging, aiming at the root of the issue. This theme has often been linked with discussions about documentation status within immigrant families. As discussed in the section of our six major themes, having access to official forms of personal identification (such as a driver's license) looms large in the lives of immigrant families. Across multiple aspects of life, from schooling to work, from housing to traveling, having documentation/identification makes the difference between having rights and being excluded. Several quotes from our interviewees show how a “piece of paper” can bring families and communities together, fostering belonging.

4.4. CISER and Student Involvement

In the Results section, we presented the six main themes that emerged from our analysis. We also underlined how the CISER approach, which brings together students, researchers, and community organizations, encouraged the respondents to share personal, meaningful, and rich stories. Here, we discuss how CISER, when mutually respectful and democratic, can deepen community–university partnerships, going beyond benefitting the researchers by stimulating the collection of more meaningful data that are also crucial for community partners as they work and organize towards community change. We also extended our critical partnership approach to our students, recognizing their unique expertise and knowledge, centering the marginalized, and involving them equally in all aspects of the research enterprise. The CISER process facilitated a deeper exploration of the relationship between place and belonging, allowing respondents to share personal experiences with the spaces they occupy. This approach gave a voice to the experiential subjectivity of the community, providing a safe interview environment that encouraged interviewees to share rich, personal anecdotes about their experiences with integration and belonging in Santa Cruz County. By treating language skills, cultural capital, and life experiences of students as well as research participants as key assets, CISER flipped the deficit script, building trust with the hard-to-reach populations our community partners serve and ultimately collecting higher quality data. The shared experiences between students and participants stimulated conversation and storytelling, forging durable and meaningful partnerships between the university and the surrounding community while addressing key local concerns. Not only do CISER projects support our community partners' quest for justice, but student involvement in CISER also works towards achieving students' own sense of educational justice, improving academic outcomes, boosting retention, and lifting graduate school attendance. Engaging in research with a cohort of peers and faculty mentors beyond the classroom also helps underrepresented students develop real-world skills and prepare for community-engaged work.

Student engagement facilitates the critical understanding of how systemic forms of oppression impact immigrant families' experiences. Student inclusion promotes equitable representation and a Mestiza consciousness, a deeper understanding of how we, as part of immigrant communities, are affected by multiple layers of adversity (Torre and Ayala 2009). Students that share immigrant identities foster growth-oriented opportunities throughout the data collection, data analysis, and writing process to further develop and uplift immigrant's personal and cultural knowledge on facilitators and inhibitors of belonging. Student involvement following provider interviews elevates the humanization of our family participants through multiplicity and hybridity, the active participation and inclusion of different positionalities that promote diverse perspectives and opens the door to finding connections among difference for social justice and equity. Student engagement may lead to *Choques*, a sense of uncomfotability due to disagreements in the interpretations of positionalities and experiences in relation to participants' individual and familial journeys pre, during, and post-migration. *Choques* fosters the opportunity to dive deeper into our most vulnerable selves to seek how and why it is that we experience social inequities on a spectrum. Student ability to develop a sense of strength through vulnerability promotes solidarity through self-reflection, connectedness across difference, and solidifying their shared ambition for a deeper understanding or *conocimiento* of knowledge for and by the community (Anzaldúa and Keating 2002). Students connected in their ties with the Latiné immigrant community and found that their differences in positionalities, upbringings, and disciplines were critical assets for building on the themes of belonging and not belonging among providers in Santa Cruz County. Through the CISER process, students went from colleagues to compañerxs, inspiring shared aspirations of placing immigrant families' voices at the forefront of research. This intention created an opportunity of developing more fruitful results, with an emphasis on how forms of exclusion can either facilitate or inhibit a sense of belonging on a personal, communal, and institutional level(s).

5. Conclusions

Our study has both scholarly and policy merits. In terms of migration scholarship, our research on mixed-status families helps move debates beyond a focus on individual migrants and the documented/undocumented binary (Castañeda 2019; Dreby 2012; Menjívar et al. 2016). It also adds to the scholarship on belonging (Yuval-Davis 2006; Powell and Menéndian 2016), including mixed-status families, a broader sense of “citizenship”, and a stronger focus on students and youth (Gonzales 2016; Rosaldo 1994; Simonsen 2019). In terms of academic significance for students, the CISER approach helps connect students (both on campus and in the community) to the research and public missions of the university. Combining research training with the connection between home and community enhances students’ skills, confidence, and self-efficacy, which have been shown to improve retention, graduation rates, and graduate school attendance (Mayer et al. 2019). Our project thus solidifies linkages between research, service learning, and community organizations, leveraging campus–community partnerships toward social and policy change.

In addition to scholarly debates, policy and practice discussions closer to immigrant and/or marginalized communities have also focused on the importance of belonging. Our collaborative approach, which involved our community partners not only in identifying critical research questions, but also as equal partners in collecting and analyzing data, and communicating results back to the wider community, helps forge more durable and meaningful partnerships between the university and the surrounding community, while also increasing the public relevance and reach of social science research. This research connects to practice and policy, drawing on the linguistic, cultural, and research assets of our students (many of whom are first-generation and from mixed-status families) and our collaborations with community-based organizations to produce impactful new data on a hard-to-reach population. The team shared the outcomes of the study with key local policymakers and officials, community leaders, organizations, and to community members through accessible bi-lingual research products, public presentations, and locally sponsored fora. By helping to document the experiences of immigrant families and the immigrant-led organizations or immigrant advocates navigating and transforming conditions in our County during this period, We Belong sought to work in solidarity, and to preserve a record of the ways that daily experiences, practices, feelings and visions of ordinary people working to build social capital and a better life not only matter, but can provide examples of resistance and transformation.

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Note

¹ A “mixed-status family” is a family whose members include people with different citizenship or immigration statuses.

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