

## How Ethnic Realities Structure the Labor Market Experiences of Undocumented Young Adults

**Esther Yoona Cho**, University of California, Berkeley

Recent debates about undocumented immigrants have largely overlooked those of Asian origin, focusing instead on controversies about undocumented Latinos. However, we cannot understand the full range of factors affecting the life chances of undocumented newcomers to the United States without paying attention to diverse ethnic communities and labor market niches. My research contributes by comparing sectors of the labor market where Asians and Latino immigrants are highly concentrated. I am especially interested in better understanding the social networks that structure opportunities and supports for undocumented immigrants who tend to be left out of mainstream U.S. economic arrangements. The current implementation of Deferred Action policies is opening new labor-market opportunities for many young non-citizens, but their social ties and prior labor-market experiences may influence the impact of the new reforms.

To probe the social factors at work, I interviewed about 30 young adults of Korean and Latino origin who arrived in California as undocumented immigrant children or youths – and within these groups, I focused especially on highly educated individuals. These are the most privileged people within the undocumented immigrant population, so any impediments I found due to their legal status are likely to be even more constraining for less educated undocumented adults. **Work Experiences in Different Ethnic Labor Force Niches**

My interview results highlight distinct labor-market experiences and impediments faced by high-achieving young immigrants. Work experiences are arguably the most defining for young people making the transition to adulthood, and, particularly in the U.S., work is central to adult social identities. My research confirmed that, because of their legal status, all undocumented young adults must navigate certain typical barriers to employment. Yet I also discovered that everyday experiences are conditioned by opportunity structures that vary for different ethno-racial communities. The nature of the work these undocumented high-achievers ultimately find is significantly shaped by Asian versus Latino immigrant networks and the niches these two ethnic groups have carved out in the U.S. labor market.

- Despite comparable levels of education, my Korean-origin respondents were more likely to have access to a broader range of occupations than their Mexican-origin counterparts. Given extensive webs of Korean businesses in California, undocumented young Koreans have opportunities that extended beyond low-wage, blue-collar labor positions.
- The work experiences of my Mexican-origin respondents varied depending on their relationships to predominantly Latino-oriented nonprofit organizations that work to support undocumented immigrants. Interviewees who reported connections to such nonprofits were able to learn about ways to avoid getting stuck in low-wage jobs, but others ended up in such posts. That is, labor market opportunities were split for the Latino young adults, more or less constrained depending on the specific ethnic niche in which they were socially embedded.

Some examples illuminate these general findings. One interviewee, a 26-year-old Mexican-origin respondent named Felipe, had graduated from a top university with Latin honors, while the academic credentials of 27-year-old Paul, a young man of Korean origin, were not nearly as strong. However, ties to different ethno-racial communities led Felipe to work as a cashier at a fast-food franchise for several years and to remain trapped in this position even after receiving work authorization through the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, while Paul managed to find work after college in a couple of Korean-operated law firms and then, with Deferred Action assistance, easily moved into a job with benefits in the primary labor market. Still, Felipe's experience was not the same as some other undocumented Latinos. Unlike Felipe, 27-year-old Gabriela, also of Mexican origin, learned from allies and peers about "creative ways to work and get paid" by January 8, 2016

<https://scholars.org>

leaving jobs as a parking attendant and telemarketer to become a program manager for a nonprofit organization. With assistance from the Deferred Action program, Gabriela quickly secured a reputable job in the primary labor market, probably because of her prior employment experience at the nonprofit organization.

### **Ethnic Niches as Safety Nets and Potential Springboards**

All of my respondents had been raised in the merit-based American education system, so inevitably they all felt frustrated by legal barriers and ethnic labor-market niches that could keep them from realizing their full educational and career potentials. Nevertheless, my research suggests a more optimistic understanding of some of the opportunities for work offered in ethnic niches rich in capital. Some opportunities may offer chances for advancement and material stability, especially for undocumented young people who are approved for participation in the Deferred Action program or gain other opportunities in the future to regularize their legal work status. Existing research suggests that any beneficial impact from favorable ethnic labor market niches tends to diminish for each successive immigrant generation. But for those in what is called the “1.5 generation,” who arrived in the United States as undocumented children or teenagers, some ethnic niches offer relatively good opportunities – not an ideal range of possibilities, but better opportunities than simply dead-end low-wage laboring jobs.

By examining the influence of ethnic niches on employment trajectories of Asian and Latino undocumented young adults, I have highlighted important new facets of *structured heterogeneity* in the experience of “illegality.” Clearly, the economic consequences of illegality are not exactly the same for all young adults entering the labor market. Their experiences depend on labor market niches that are often patterned by race and ethnicity.

Future research may usefully interrogate other potential sources of heterogeneity in the opportunities and constraints faced by workers without full legal citizen status – for example, differences patterned by gender, socioeconomic status, educational background, family composition, and other crucial social characteristics. As implementation of programs mandating deportation relief through “Deferred Action” and partial legal protections for many undocumented residents continue, scholars and policymakers must learn more about the varied labor market experiences and opportunities faced by subgroups of undocumented job aspirants.

**Read more in Esther Yoona Cho, “Revisiting Ethnic Niches: Labor Market Experiences of High-Achieving Asian and Latino Undocumented Young Adults,” in *Undocumented Migration and the Experience of Illegality*, edited by Roberto Gonzales and Steven Raphael (Russell Sage Foundation, forthcoming).**

[www.scholarsstrategynetwork.org](http://www.scholarsstrategynetwork.org)

January 2016