

Summary

Restrictionist policies and anti-immigrant and anti-Latinx hostility in the United States undermine access to refugee resettlement, increasing immigrants' political, economic, social, and health vulnerabilities. The assumption that other organizations, like churches, will step in where governments fail urges scholars and policy makers to focus on how these organizations shape unaccompanied minors' integration. Churches are pillars of solidarity and support within immigrant communities serving as major sources of social and economic assistance for those in need. They also provide a recreational space for youth and spiritual uplift through religious activities. Yet, unaccompanied, undocumented Central American youth describe organizational practices that unwittingly perpetuate inequality within the Latinx community, and in turn, contribute to their incorporation "*retraso*" or setback. To address this, federal- and state-level governments should lift refugee bars and prioritize unaccompanied minor integration; thereby alleviating the burden on local level organizations. Local organizations should be attentive to organizational practices that do not promote the well-being of today's newcomers.

Author Biography

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How Religious Organizations Fail to Support Unaccompanied Indigenous Latinx Youth

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In America's neoliberal and individualistic society, pressure falls on private safety nets to fill the gaps where public safety nets have eroded. Restrictionist policies and anti-immigrant and anti-Latinx hostility erode social safety nets—including access to refugee resettlement—which increases immigrants' political, economic, social, and health vulnerabilities. Today's Latinx newcomers, primarily from the Central American countries El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, include vulnerable populations like unaccompanied migrant children. The assumption that civil society will step in where governments fail, urges scholars and policy makers to turn attention to how *civil service organizations* shape unaccompanied minors' integration.

Churches are often seen as pillars of solidarity and support within immigrant communities, which serve as major sources of social and economic assistance. Churches are lauded as immigrant community safety nets: advocates for immigrant rights and an "urban service hub" (Ley 2008). Studies of youth in church point to the ways in which parents usher their children's church going to supplement the values and practices they wish to instill in them.

However, in my study of unaccompanied, undocumented Central American (Guatemalan Maya) youth, I observed that churches can unwittingly perpetuate inequality within the Latinx community. While churches provide a recreational space and spiritual uplift through religious activities, unaccompanied youth poignantly explain how institutional marginalization and inequality contributes to their incorporation "*retraso*" or setback.

1. Churches offer individualistic solutions for structural marginalization.

One of the primary ways *retraso* was observed was through churches' reliance on individualistic solutions for structural marginalization. For example, church-goers economic, social, and health needs are met with messages to rely on God and build spiritual fortitude. Unaccompanied Maya youth experience incorporation *retraso* as they are instructed to press into their faith for provision, which may actually delay the search for financial, educational, and health services. Furthermore, this doctrine places the onus of setback onto youth by communicating that continued suffering is an indication of weak faith. Youth may feel greater guilt and shame because they experience *retraso*, which initiates a cycle that pressures youth to press further into service to obtain pardon from God.

2. Churches exacerbate ethnic disadvantages in accessing support.

Churches, like all organizations, reflect the unequal relations in their surrounding society and can perpetuate existing exclusionary practices among their members (Acker 2006). Though religious communities are often thought to be social spaces where ethnic differences can be transcended in the name of a shared religious identity, the experiences of Indigenous Maya youth elucidate that limitations exist. Indigenous migrants experience ethnic disadvantages in accessing support that are shaped by anti-Indian disparagement by mestizos and Ladinos (i.e., non-indigenous people) in Latin American and U.S.-contexts (Blackwell et al. 2017). Anti-Indian sentiment compound with anti-immigrant sentiment to create hybrid inequalities throughout society and its institutions. Within the church, organizational dynamics and relations between

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Canizales, Stephanie L. 2018. "Support and Setback: The Role of Religion in the Incorporation of Unaccompanied Indigenous Youth in Los Angeles." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 45(9):1613–1630.

Further Reading

Acker, Joan. 2006. "Inequality Regimes: Gender, Class and Race in Organizations." *Gender and Society* 20:441–464.

Blackwell, Maylei, Florida Alma Boj Lopez, Luis Urrieta Jr. (2017). "Critical Latinx Indigenities." *Latino Studies* 15:126–137.

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members are infiltrated by such hybrid inequalities, and exacerbate the social, economic, and political inequalities that unaccompanied Indigenous Maya youth experience in everyday life.

The subordination of the Indigenous Latinx population within the church is evident to unaccompanied youth who report that, when prompted to serve, they are recruited for more laborious service within the church relative to non-indigenous youth. This exacerbates youths' sense of marginalization within the church community. These tasks include setting- and cleaning-up events or guarding the parking lot, whereas non-indigenous youth might be tasked as ushers or greeters. During informal conversations with Guatemalan Maya adult and young-adult churchgoers, they commented that they do not feel fully accepted in the parish, but as if they are looked down upon by Guatemalan Ladinos (the non-indigenous population), as well as other Central Americans and Mexicans. Indigenous Mayan youth might attempt to conceal their ethnic identity as to avoid being identified as Maya. The concealment of ethnic identity can cause youth to retreat from social interactions that could otherwise provide them with new sources of social capital to mobilize them out of poverty.

Policy Implications

In my research, I detail how youth challenge these disadvantages within churches and evince agency as they reconcile their *retraso*. Important here is that efforts to ameliorate exclusion can unwittingly function to perpetuate it when individualistic solutions are offered in response to collective structural disadvantages. Further, civil society's most lauded safety nets are unevenly accessible, and their inaccessibility produces unequal outcomes. Ideologies of co-ethnic solidarity and linked fate can deteriorate under racism's weight. Organizations like churches, which are thought of as pillars of solidarity among the most vulnerable, can maintain exclusionary or oppressive practices based on these marginalized identities. An important first step toward correcting harms against unaccompanied Latinx minor's well-being in the U.S. is to prioritize their integration at federal, state, and local levels. However, as federal and local governments move further down the path of restrictionism, today's unaccompanied minors are ever reliant on civil society to mind the gap. The diversity of the Latinx migrant population, and the growing presence of unaccompanied Indigenous Maya youth in immigrant communities presents challenges and requires scholars, advocates, and policy makers to hold organizations accountable to their inclusion.

Policy Recommendations

- Encourage outreach across community-based organizations to increase awareness of available services for youth.
- Establish mentorship programs between long-settled and newly arrived unaccompanied young people to avoid *retraso* in religious and non-religious community organizations.
- Raise organizational leaders' awareness of the diversity of the Latinx community and the diverse needs of the community.
- Develop and fund county and state level immigrant integration efforts to alleviate pressures on local organizations.