



## Impact of Undocumented Immigrants on Adult ESL during COVID-19 and Beyond

All over the United States, adult ESL programs enroll students who are undocumented immigrants, often unbeknownst to the instructors who teach them. During the COVID-19 crisis, adult ESL enrollments decreased overall, but most especially for the undocumented immigrants who were most disadvantaged during the crisis. In order for program administrators and instructors to better understand the situation, this article explores who those with undocumented status are, why they have come to the US, and how well they are being served by public and private institutions and organizations. It details the nationality and settlement patterns of the undocumented immigrants as well as reasons for their departure from their homes around the world and their journeys to the United States. This article also discusses solutions for issues undocumented students face, including pedagogical approaches addressing the needs of undocumented learners given their migration experiences, funding to expand classrooms and hire teachers qualified to meet the needs of these students, and better collaboration between public schools and nonprofit organizations.

**Keywords:** adult ESL, undocumented immigrants, trauma, pedagogical approaches, advocacy

In the past two years, the COVID-19 crisis has taken a toll on adult non-credit ESL enrollments. Although both documented and undocumented immigrants were enrolled, those with limited education and undocumented status were especially hard hit. Since face-to-face instruction was deemed unsafe, many classes were canceled or moved online. In other cases, ESL teachers remained connected through various creative methods—classes held outside in parking lots to accommodate appropriate social distancing, “flipped classrooms,” correspondence-based distance learning programs, hand delivery of materials to students’ homes, and telephone calls about assignments.

Because many of these methods were unfamiliar to undocumented students and because many lacked digital literacy skills to participate in online learning, many stopped coming to class. Besides this, they were hampered by additional strains on families, such as job changes, housing insecurity, added responsibility of having children home from school, and concerns over health care of family members (Miles, 2021). Many adult immigrants, including citizens, permanent residents, refugees, and asylees, were affected, but these conditions were particularly serious for impoverished undocumented immigrants attempting to navigate a country where they had no legal status and did not speak English. Quite possibly, many had experienced trauma before they got to the US. In addition, many encountered anti-immigrant sentiment after they arrived as well (Larrotta, 2019).

This article describes the state of affairs in education for these undocumented immigrants. It attempts to illuminate who they are, why they have come to the US, how well they are being served by public and private institutions or organizations, and how ESL teachers can accommodate these students in their classrooms in pandemic times and beyond.

### **Who are the Undocumented Immigrants?**

One feature of teaching adult, federally funded, non-credit ESL in the US is that it takes place in various settings, and teachers may teach in more than one setting. A teacher can be employed at adult schools, continuing education programs, community centers, libraries, church educational programs, and prisons. In any case, teachers rarely know who is documented and who is undocumented in their classrooms. The Department of Education and the Office for Civil Rights prohibits discrimination based on civil rights law on the basis of race, color, sex, disability, age, and national origin (which may include citizenship or immigration status), so this information is generally not provided so that all students will have equal access to education in a nondiscriminatory manner (Department of Education, 2022). Furthermore, because of stigma or fear of deportation, students themselves rarely reveal whether they have crossed the border without documentation or overstayed a visa.

Nevertheless, according to the 2020 census, there were approximately 11,000,000 undocumented immigrants in the US in 2019 (Migration Policy Institute, 2021), a population about the size of New York City and Houston combined. According to the Migration Policy Institute (2019), 2,739,000 out of about 11 million undocumented immigrants in the US resided in California, about 25%. This statistic fluctuates year to year as people enter without documentation, overstay a visa, voluntarily leave the country, are deported, die, or become lawful residents (Lopez et al., 2021).

In terms of nationality, 75% of undocumented people are from Latin America, 15% are from Asia, and 10% are from other countries (Migration Policy Institute, 2021). According to the United States Customs and Border Protection (USCBP) (2022c), those from Latin America mostly come from Mexico and the Northern Triangle (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras). The largest numbers of other undocumented immigrants come from Ecuador, Brazil, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Cuba, and Haiti.

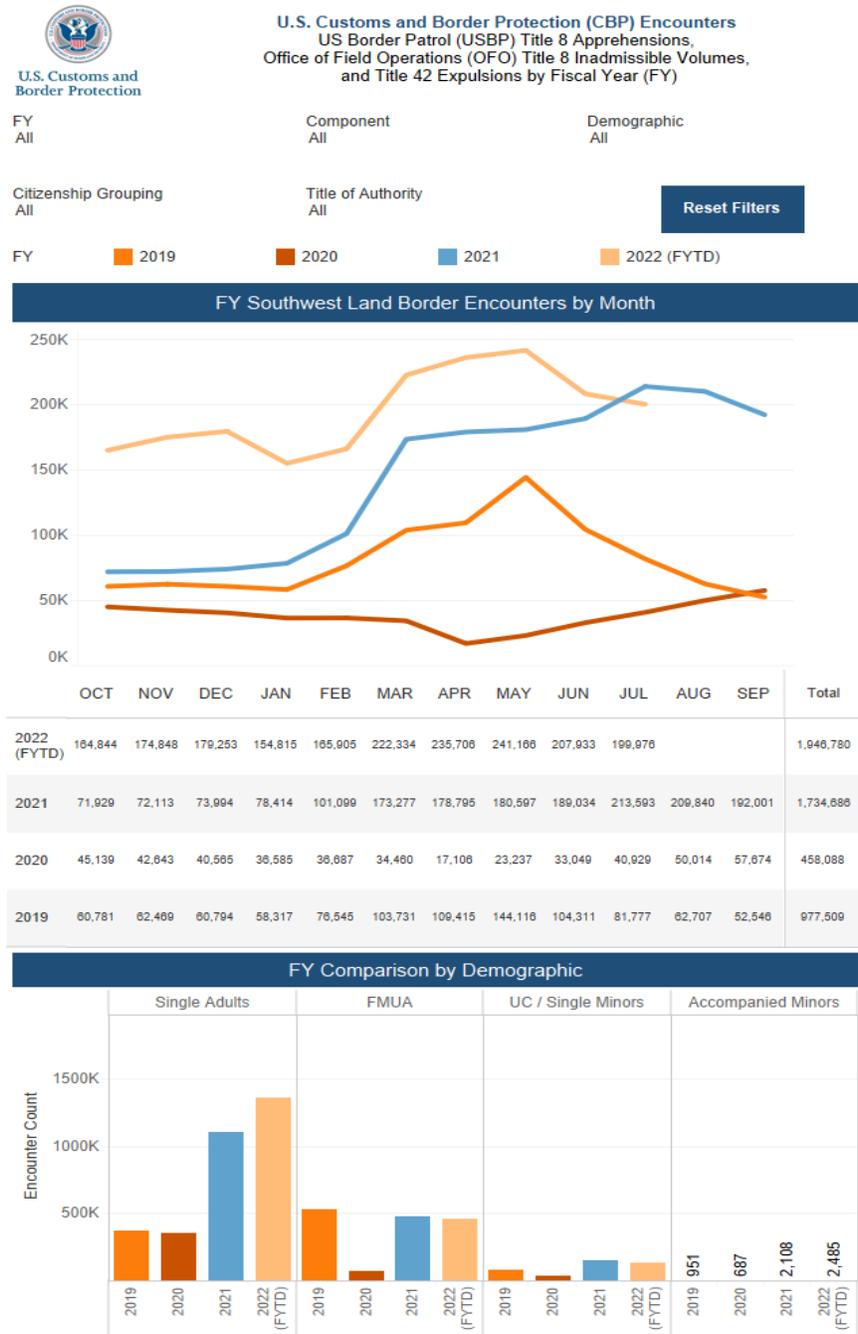
The majority of Haitian immigrants left their homeland because of the 2010 earthquake. Many traveled to Chile and Brazil for increased economic opportunity. However, the COVID-19 epidemic, discrimination, and more restrictive immigration laws in Chile spurred them northward to the United States in hopes of greater opportunity (Alden & Tippet, 2021; Yates, 2021). Some Haitians and people from African and Middle Eastern countries and India already speak some English. Most undocumented immigrants who hail from Latin America came by foot, car, or truck, but 584,885 came by plane from other countries and overstayed their visas in 2020 (Migration Policy Institute, 2021).

Fifty percent of undocumented immigrants live in California, Texas, or New York. Twenty percent live in counties around the four major cities: Los Angeles, New York, Houston, and Chicago. Many of these immigrants arrive with little or interrupted formal education, which has implications for further education and job prospects in the US. Immigrants from Mexico and Central America are the least likely to be high school graduates (54% and 47% respectively) (Budiman, 2020).

Counter to expectation, the number of undocumented immigrants entering between 2015 to 2020 showed a pattern of “little growth or decline” and remained fairly stable (Capps et al., 2020). However, a huge change occurred in Fiscal Year 2021 (October 1, 2020–September 30, 2021), when 1,734,686 undocumented immigrants were encountered by USCBP at or between entry points (USCBP,

2022a). This was the highest number in over 20 years (Chiacu, 2021). Figure 1 clearly shows that USCBP encounters greatly increased the last two fiscal years, in 2021 and 2022, during the Biden administration, compared to 2019 and 2020.

**Figure 1**  
2019–2022 Southwest Land Border Encounters by Month and Fiscal Year



Source: USBP and OFO official year end reporting for FY19-FY21; USBP and OFO month end reporting for FY22 to date. Data is current as of 08/03/2022.

**Note.** USCBP (2022d).

The types and number of undocumented immigrants coming to the US have been changing. According to USCBP (2022c), of the more than 1.7 million border encounters, 146,054 were unaccompanied children without parents or legal guardians, 478,492 were family units, and 1,098,500 were single adults. These included 388,249 women and girls, an increase of 159% over the average for the years 2014–2019. According to Ariel Ruiz Soto, Policy Analyst at the Migration Policy Institute, repeat crossers accounted for some of the large number of additional immigrants reportedly encountered at the border in the past few years (2022). According to Croucher (2022), USCBP estimated at least 600,000 undetected undocumented entries at the southern US border in Fiscal Year 2022. This means that more than 600,000 individuals were not apprehended but were detected by video surveillance or footprints on the ground while crossing the border.

It is difficult to derive an exact number of undocumented immigrants who have arrived in the US between Fiscal Year 2020 to Fiscal Year 2023 to-date because many who were encountered were denied admission or withdrew applications and returned to their countries; others were expelled under the Title 42 CDC order of health emergency or through Title 8 immigration enforcement cases. Still others were undetected undocumented entries or repeat crossers (which can reduce the accuracy of the total numbers reported). According to USCBP (2023), between 2020 to 2023, 7,680,910 undocumented immigrants were encountered at the US border. And in the week prior to May 11, 2023, the day the Title 42 COVID-19 order was ended, approximately 10,000 undocumented immigrants crossed the border each day (Thomson Reuters, 2023). This suggests that the large number of immigrants, mostly non-native English speakers, have been and will be entering ESL classrooms in the coming months and notes the size of the population to be served.

### **Why Have Undocumented Immigrants Come to the US?**

There are a variety of push-pull factors causing undocumented immigrants to come to the US. Push factors include food insecurity, gang violence, drug cartels, extortion, and environmental problems, e.g., earthquakes, floods, and hurricanes, in their native countries (Bolter, 2021). They also come for various pull factors in the US like employment, education, health care, more opportunities for their children, and the “American Dream.”

Unfortunately, migrants fleeing horrible environmental, social, and economic conditions are further endangered on the immigrant trail by coyotes, drug cartels, and sex traffickers, who take advantage of their vulnerabilities and further traumatize them on their journeys (Franco, 2021; Jordan, 2022; USCBP, 2022b).

The trafficking has also led to dangerous and frightening experiences for migrants leaving and/or fleeing their homelands and will likely have an impact on psychological readiness for English learning. Many immigrants are extorted by traffickers, sometimes resulting in human slave labor that keeps them in bondage for years as they pay back their traffickers with sexual favors or money (Jordan, 2022). These atrocities cause emotional scars that endure and impact all aspects of the victims’ lives, including their ability to learn and participate in a classroom (TESOL, 2006).

### **How Well Are Undocumented Immigrants Being Served by Public and Private Institutions or Organizations?**

The field of Adult ESL Education provides a plethora of programs for undocumented ESL students. These programs, grounded in behaviorist, emancipatory, or constructivist philosophies (Eyring, 2014), cover a range of relevant purposes for students, including general ESOL, family literacy, civics, and workplace education. The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) sets policy and funding for adult ESOL

programs in the United States (US Department of Labor, n.d.). Although general ESOL and literacy instruction is included, workforce development, with a goal of delivering high quality education with a good return on investment, is a priority (Bragg, 2016; Pickard 2016). Nevertheless, some critics claim that the federal government's emphasis on employment, standardized testing, and complex reporting requirements may have inadvertently decreased the total number of programs serving adult ESOL learners and that this curriculum does not meet every learner need (Eyring, 2014; Mortrude, 2020).

The curriculum is not the only concern. Federal funding is also inadequate. According to Waldman et al. (2022), adult education funding in the United States has remained "stagnant" the past 20 years. They state, "In communities with lower literacy, there is often less economic investment, a smaller tax base and fewer resources to fund public services." Not surprisingly, the COVID-19 crisis has revealed severe underfunding in adult education in many states, and only a small portion of undocumented immigrants are being served (National Association of State Directors of Adult Education, 2022). According to Cayanna Good, Georgia's Assistant Commissioner of Adult Education, "Undocumented immigrants without programs to serve them are falling through the cracks" (Waldman et al., 2022).

However, private nonprofit 501(c)(3) organizations are covering some of the slack (Larrotta, 2017). There are various types of nonprofits providing ESL and work preparedness instruction (Hung, 2007). These include church and religious organizations (e.g., Catholic charities), cultural heritage organizations (e.g., National Association for the Education and Advancement of Cambodian, Laotian, and Vietnamese Americans [NAFEA]), service agencies (e.g., Mexican American Legal Defense and Education [MALDEF]), and immigrant secular organizations (e.g., Northwest Immigrant Rights Project). Many of these nongovernmental organizations work with immigrants, regardless of their immigration status.

Past research has reported that nonprofits serve approximately 30% foreign-born clients, of whom 33% are undocumented (Hung, 2007; Martin, 2012). Nonprofits may be subsidized by private donors, state funds, philanthropic organizations (e.g., Ford Foundation), corporations (e.g., FedEx), or federally supported organizations like the International Organization for Migration (IOM). To give credit where it is due, many nonprofits genuinely want to serve undocumented immigrants because these individuals are the most vulnerable and have the greatest need (Martin, 2012). Likewise, students sometimes feel safer attending classes at private versus public institutions. Yet, many of these nonprofit organizations hire uncertified ESL teachers and rely largely on volunteer tutors and teachers.

### **What Role Should Adult ESL Teachers Play in Serving Undocumented Immigrants?**

Despite funding problems and a lack of a full-time teaching staff with health and retirement benefits, adult ESL teachers play indispensable roles as community resources and/or advocates for their learners. They are on the front lines of teaching students English and orienting them to a new society. Following the COVID 19 crisis, ESL teachers are needed more than ever (Gecker, 2021). The international organization Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) has developed *Standards for ESL/EFL Teachers of Adults* (TESOL, 2008), but it is entirely voluntary for programs to implement these standards. Staff development often includes only voluntary attendance at workshops, conferences, or seminars, so many do not participate. There is also a high turnover rate of adult ESL teachers and, therefore, a continual need to train new teachers (Cochi, 2016, pp. 8-10). The COVID-19 crisis has further exacerbated this situation with millions of new undocumented immigrants crossing the borders and fewer trained adult ESL teachers available.

The Position Statement on the Diversity of English Language Learners in the United States by Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, Inc. (2006) outlines some general factors that ESL

instructors should be aware of when planning for the education of diverse adult learners during the COVID-19 crisis and into the future. First, learners may have different perspectives on the interaction of teachers and students or on the value of education. Second, content of texts can be interpreted differently depending upon student background experience. Next, native-language literacy should not be assumed; when future learners entering the US are not fully literate in their native languages, this can greatly affect speed of learning in English. Also, socioeconomic status and family expectations may affect the time a student has to spend on studies and the manner in which studies are completed. Finally, instructors must consider how to adapt curriculum and assessment policy to fit the needs of these multilingual and multicultural learners.

There are also many specific ways that adult ESL teachers can adapt classroom processes to the needs of undocumented immigrant learners. First, educators can provide a warm and welcoming climate. Crawford and Witherspoon Arnold (2016) found that teachers who genuinely care about undocumented students are the most successful. Although students may choose not to reveal their immigration statuses, public school teachers may assume that a certain proportion of their students are undocumented immigrants and be prepared to examine how actual life experiences may contrast with those who are documented, e.g., through being barred from obtaining driver's licenses in some states, applying to post-secondary education, being hired for jobs, etc.

Along with this, a teacher should be aware of the psychological health of their learners and consider that newly arrived undocumented immigrants may be experiencing emotional issues and culture shock after leaving their homes (Aranda, 2016). They also may feel a certain degree of cognitive dissonance because they are not documented and consequently fear deportation (American Psychological Association, 2013; Connery & Weiner, 2021).

Teachers should have positive expectations for all of their students, especially for those with limited education in their native countries who have low literacy skills. Training to teach undocumented students should also include addressing their computer and technology needs as much of the material they will need and communication they will undertake is only available through the internet (Miles, 2021; Schmidt, 2020).

A teacher should also design assignments that allow students to express themselves and reveal their concerns. For example, Nash (2019) suggests that class activities encourage the sharing of real-life experiences and foster a sense of commonalities among classmates. For example, discussing how to get a living wage job or how to enable one's children to eat healthfully will provide a deeper and more relevant discussion for their students than just discussing types of jobs or types of foods might.

Also, teachers should solicit student input on class study topics. As Nash states, "We can . . . help students step back and study an issue more deeply by organizing instruction into thematic units that encourage students to name their concerns, ask and investigate their own questions, and develop the language skills to express informed opinions" (2019, p. 64).

Because undocumented immigrants tend to "live in the shadows" by isolating themselves or staying in their homes, they may have fewer opportunities to interact with English speakers outside the classroom (American Psychological Association, 2013). Therefore, teachers should make the classroom as stimulating and interactive as possible. Using pair work and group work with meaningful tasks can increase the chances students have to get to know one another and make friends.

Additionally, teachers need to know that their voices are important in advocating for adequate staff, resources, translation services, and computers at their schools or districts (Miles, 2021). If teachers are familiar with the home languages of undocumented students, they can also use them to clarify and explain confusing subjects or sensitive topics. Finally, teachers might collaborate with other organizations to take field trips to community sites or bring in speakers to talk about legal, counseling, or citizenship issues (Finn Miller 2019; Nash, 2019; Vanek et al., 2020). Some strategies teachers can use to address the needs of their undocumented students in classrooms with other learners (Eyring, 2022) include:

1. Provide a warm and welcoming climate.
2. Be aware of the psychological health of learners, including culture shock.
3. Genuinely compliment and encourage all learners.
4. Become better prepared to address the ESL learning needs of immigrant learners.
5. Make assignments which allow students to share their concerns.
6. Solicit input on class study topics.
7. Build a stimulating and interactive learning community.
8. Argue for adequate resources, staff, materials appropriate to ESL.
9. Use students' home languages (if you know it) to help explain information to immigrants and help them navigate a new society.
10. Collaborate with others to provide information about the community.

### **Conclusion**

ESL teachers and students have been impacted greatly by the COVID-19 epidemic. Both had to learn to communicate in new ways and adjust their daily routines to accommodate their other family, health, and educational needs. Undocumented immigrant learners likely suffered the most because of their legal status, potentially limited English proficiencies, and difficulties with easily accessing human and material resources in their daily lives. Ultimately, many were lost from ESL classrooms in the shuffle.

Well-trained ESL teachers understand the diversity of students in their classes and should be able to flexibly address their pedagogical needs inside and outside of a crisis. Knowing who one's learners are, where they came from, and why they are in the US is the first step for planning personalized instruction and giving emotional support. California is home to a large proportion of the undocumented immigrants already in the US and to the newest surge of undocumented immigrants who have arrived in the past 3 years. Understanding the push-pull factors that led them to the US can provide background knowledge for teachers to make instruction more relevant and useful.

Before and during the crisis, some critics have said that funding was inadequate and the curriculum was inappropriate for many adult ESL learners. This may be even more the case as millions of undocumented learners enter public and non-profit adult programs, sometimes having been victimized by any number of factors like the cartels, weather, war, and persecution. In fiscal year 2021, less than 500,000 were served by adult public English Language Acquisition (ELA or ESL) programs (National Association of State Directors of Adult Education, 2022), with the rest being served by non-public sources. This likely leaves millions of undocumented immigrants trying to access education while dealing with post-pandemic challenges and losses.

ESL instructors may not know who is undocumented in their varied classrooms, but they can play an important role in adapting classroom processes for undocumented immigrants. The measures teachers can take for undocumented students will also benefit other nonnative English-speaking learners in their classes. TESOL professionals should take the lead in advocating for more funding for public school classes

and full-time teachers who have the linguistic knowledge, pedagogical expertise, and cultural understanding to assist all of their students within the multitude of adult ESL contexts. They should also work on collaborating with teachers and volunteers in nonprofits to help upgrade their knowledge of ESL curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment options for undocumented learners. The large number of new undocumented immigrants who will be entering public and non-profit classrooms in the US will demand an army of empathetic and talented educators who can guide and direct their learners to reach their potentials, despite hardships they may have endured on the way to the US.

## Author

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