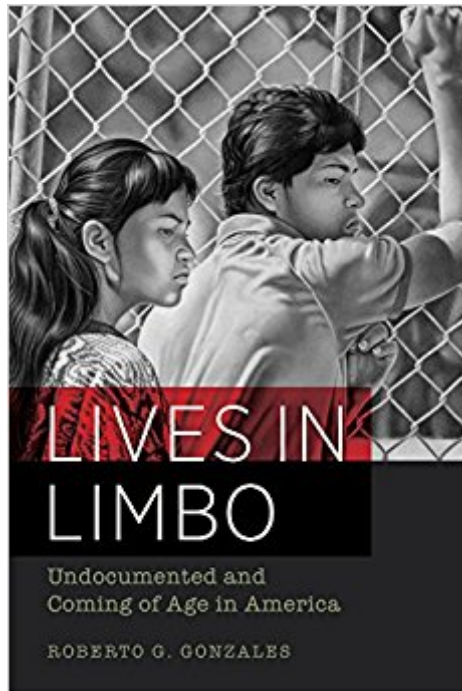




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# **Lives In Limbo: Undocumented And Coming Of Age In America**



## Synopsis

“My world seems upside down. I have grown up but I feel like I’m moving backward. And I can’t do anything about it.” • Esperanza Over two million of the nation’s eleven million undocumented immigrants have lived in the United States since childhood. Due to a broken immigration system, they grow up to uncertain futures. In *Lives in Limbo*, Roberto G. Gonzales introduces us to two groups: the college-goers, like Ricardo, who had good grades and a strong network of community support that propelled him to college and DREAM Act organizing but still landed in a factory job a few short years after graduation, and the early-exiters, like Gabriel, who failed to make meaningful connections in high school and started navigating dead-end jobs, immigration checkpoints, and a world narrowly circumscribed by legal limitations. This vivid ethnography explores why highly educated undocumented youth share similar work and life outcomes with their less-educated peers, despite the fact that higher education is touted as the path to integration and success in America. Mining the results of an extraordinary twelve-year study that followed 150 undocumented young adults in Los Angeles, *Lives in Limbo* exposes the failures of a system that integrates children into K-12 schools but ultimately denies them the rewards of their labor. *•*

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Based on an impressive ethnographic study carried out over twelve years, the book brings to light the rich and detailed voices and experiences of the 1.5 generation." (NACLA: Report on the

Americas)"A must-read... This book is a critical addition to blossoming research on the undocumented 1.5-generation." (City & Society 2017-04-01)

"Superb. . . . An important examination of the devastating consequences of 'illegality' on our young people."--Junot Díaz, author of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and *This is How You Lose Her* "Lives in Limbo is a book of tragic beauty. It recounts with moral clarity, conceptual precision, and empirical rigor what Hannah Arendt, writing in another terrible time, called 'the calamity of the right-less.' It is about what happens in a society, our society, when children and youth who are de facto but not de jure members of the family of the nation lose the right to have rights. It fearlessly narrates the quotidian empire of suffering and shattered dreams our barbaric immigration system has begotten. Reading it will bring tears and joy. It will make you mad and it will make you sad. It will stand as the definitive study of the undocumented coming of age in our midst. It is a book every teacher, every policymaker, indeed every concerned citizen should read and ponder."--Marcelo M. Suárez-Villa, coeditor of *Latinos: Remaking America* "Roberto G. Gonzales offers a masterful portrait of the 2.1 million undocumented migrants who arrived as children and grew up in the United States. *Lives in Limbo* chronicles the heartbreak and anguish they experience as they slowly come to realize there is no secure place for them in the only country they know. The compassionate telling of their stories represents qualitative social science at its finest and underscores the urgency of finding a humane solution to their plight."--Douglas S. Massey, coauthor of *Broked Boundaries: Creating Immigrant Identity in Anti-Immigrant Times* "Lives in Limbo is one of the most important books in immigration studies of the past decade. The moving and heartbreaking narratives of struggle, support, and heroism in this book should be read by every American."--Hirokazu Yoshikawa, author of *Immigrants Raising Citizens: Undocumented Parents and Their Young Children* "Lives in Limbo vividly documents the experiences of belonging and exclusion that mark the everyday lives of undocumented youth as they transition to adulthood. Through his careful attention to the ways in which these young people navigate these contradictory processes, Roberto G. Gonzales puts a human face on the many victims of America's broken immigration system. Theoretically rich, beautifully written, and cogently argued, this brilliant book is a landmark study of the human costs of American policy failures."--Mary C. Waters, coauthor of *Inheriting the City: The Children of Immigrants Come of Age* "This necessary book documents in tragic detail how American public policies prevent hardworking children from pursuing their lives as full members of the society in which they were raised. The scholarly and

personal commitment required to produce a work of this caliber is evident in the intimacy of the ethnographic work. This theoretically skillful book is one of the best examples of high-quality academic scholarship that also fully engages the policy debates of our times. An impressive achievement that will set the standard for others."--Robert C. Smith, author of *A Mexican New York: Transnational Worlds of New Immigrants* "Written after years of fieldwork, this book brings into sharp focus the plight of undocumented children transitioning to adulthood in America. Lack of a path to citizenship condemns hundreds of thousands of these youths to a life of permanent marginality. This is must reading for anyone wishing to understand the realities of contemporary immigration."--Alejandro Portes, coauthor of *Immigrant America* "This extraordinary study provides important details about a generation of immigrants that, through the courageous organizing and leadership of its members, has already permanently altered the national debate on immigration reform, politically united the Mexican American community across all generations of presence in the United States, and launched the most vibrant youth movement this country has seen in four decades. The book powerfully demonstrates the national shame in failing to enact, nearly a decade and a half after its first introduction, the congressional legislation that would permit the United States to benefit fully from the intellect, ingenuity, and perseverance of this generation of young immigrants."--Thomas A. Saenz, President and General Counsel, MALDEF (Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund) "This book accomplishes something truly remarkable. Its ethnographic commitment makes a solid contribution to scholarship without compromising on allowing the reader to experience the poignancy, sadness, distress, and emotional trauma society has inflicted on these unfortunate young people. A must-read for anyone interested in the victims of the current stalemate over immigration reform."--Leo R. Chavez, author of *Covering Immigration: Popular Images and the Politics of the Nation*

Professor Roberto Gonzales has written a book every American should read. It is hard to read in two senses. It is a scholars' book written for scholars and I wish it were not. But it is hard to read even more because of the frightening story it tells. Gonzales followed dozens of undocumented children for decades and his sad conclusion is: there is no way out. The brightest and best educated of his subjects -- almost all of them incredibly hard-working -- got nowhere (His research was done before the Obama administration created the DACA program; many will benefit from it, but only a small percentage of the population Gonzales is writing about). One finishes the book (my conclusion, not the writer's) feeling that the punishment of these families far exceeds the "crime" (actually a civil offense as Gonzales points out) of illegal

immigration. It is not hard to imagine a future American Congress and President apologizing for their treatment, as we have to Japanese families interned during World War II. In essence, these young people have received a life sentence— to low-paid jobs and cramped housing—for their parents' or even grandparents' visa violations.

Gonzales does an incredible job of peeling back the rhetoric and illuminating the lives of younger undocumented people. For too long, we have created and fed a false distinction between the deserving "Dreamer" and the low achieving early-exit/workers. Policy and personal forces collude to leave both ends of the spectrum and too many in between left out of the legal structures that they were presented through their educational experience. This work, by following people from a wide variety of communities across the country has produced a unique and compelling story that calls for an end to the scapegoating of undocumented people.

In-depth account of the consequential tragedy of our broken immigration system. Innocent people who were brought to the US as children are faced with dead-ends, even after successfully matriculating through graduate school. It's a "must read" for all of our politicians, school officials, policy makers at all levels. Detailed personal accounts of what happens to these "undocumented" young people. It puts a human face to the word "undocumented".

Amazing ethnographic research. Using this for my undergrad thesis and possibly my dissertation.

Everyone in leadership, allies and champions ought to read this book. It is a thoughtful, scholarly and personal insight into the consequences of life without papers. I have worked in this field for decades and can say without equivocation that this is the only book that truly documents the consequences that impact the undocumented. Dr. Gonzales has broken new ground with his research that others have not yet even approached. While others describe the lives of the undocumented, his work broadens our understanding of the long term impact and the urgency for reform. By page 228, Roberto's work brought out in me the sensation of wanting to jump out of my skin from desperation. But more important, as I read on, it also reminded me that it is possible that his work will help us sort out those persons and practices that speak social justice from those that walk social justice. I have long known that justice requires advocacy...it is not enough to help individuals, one must affect local, state and national policy. That has always been my hope but I know not all allies will become champions. This would obviously broaden the scope of your work

and I know that it will require your thoughtful consideration. This book will compel allies to become champions now.

Roberto Gonzales' *LIVES IN LIMBO* offers an unprecedented long-term examination of what it has been like for undocumented youth to grow up in America at the turn of the 21st century. Through extensive interviews and fieldwork with 150 Mexican youth over the course of 12 years, Gonzales traces with compelling detail how the lack of lawful status profoundly shapes young persons' possibilities for development and limits their life opportunities as adults. Both academics and non-academics will find this book to be tremendously informative. Each chapter is rich in themes, questions, contexts, and descriptions of the challenges faced by undocumented youth at different stages of their development. As a reader one is effectively transported into the continually shifting worlds of these young persons' worlds that come into being and gain shape through common engagements with peers, family members, mentors, co-workers, counselors, legal agents and others who hold various understandings of "illegality." To the extent that these social exchanges systematically determine the life trajectories of undocumented youth, Gonzales effectively demonstrates how "migrant illegalization" (a concept coined by Nicholas De Genova) is a profoundly social process and not merely a legal status imposed unilaterally by the law. Gonzales goes beyond socio-legal analyses however. In describing undocumented youth's changing understandings of themselves, others, and the world at large, he documents how the lack of status influences youth's possibilities for experience and shapes their modes of thinking, emoting, and relating to others. Accordingly, his work offers important psychosocial insights relevant to anyone interested in the psychological impact of undocumented status. Arguably the most important of these insights concerns how the lack of status affects youth's abilities to envision unique futures. Social scientists commonly discuss the "enforced orientation to the present" experienced by undocumented migrants; however, by taking a developmental perspective, Gonzales traces how such narrowed orientations come into being over time and based on social barriers imposed by the lack of status. Not only youth's aspirations but their very capacity to aspire is configured by their lack of status, which further intersects with their socioeconomic status, family relations, peer groups, school support systems, meritocratic values, and perhaps most importantly, their varied feelings of inclusion and belonging. These are important findings that speak to the way psychological processes are not only

shaped by social and political determinants, but also (and as a result) unevenly distributed according to citizenship status. Undocumented youth in America are taught to curtail their dreams and face limited future horizons in adulthood. By outlining the significant impact of legal status on young persons' everyday lives, Gonzales makes clear the tragic consequences of America's short-sighted and restrictive immigration laws as well as the urgent need to support undocumented youth and fight for comprehensive immigration reform.

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