

## “You Feel a Little Bit Less”

### *Gendered Illegality and Desirability When Dating*

*You feel like you're missing something, maybe not physically [unattractive], but unattractive as a person, I guess. . . . Just because of the [undocumented] situation that you're in, [it] makes you feel a little bit less.*

—ENRIQUE ESCOBAR

Sitting in the same coffee shop where I interviewed him two years before, Enrique struggled to articulate why he felt like an undesirable partner. Initially, he replied, “My legal situation—I don’t know.” Laughing uncomfortably, he eventually concluded that his undocumented status made him “feel a little bit less.” He had been with his partner, a second-generation citizen Latina, for almost four years. She had never said anything to make him feel “less,” but he still internalized negative feelings about his undocumented status.

In his previous interview, Enrique shared that his undocumented status and economic struggles complicated the development of their relationship. Despite earning a mechanic’s certificate at a local community college, he was repeatedly turned down for jobs because he lacked a valid Social Security number. Instead, he worked as a manager of a small tire shop, earning \$1,800 a month. He remembered that the friend who introduced him to his partner dismissively said, “She is not going to like you because of your job. You *only* work at [a tire shop]. . . . You don’t earn that much.” On an early date he was pulled over by police and forced to reveal that he did not have a driver’s license and was undocumented.

As their relationship progressed, they figured out ways to handle the barriers his undocumented status raised—she would drive, they would stay in if money was tight, they didn’t travel outside Los Angeles. But concerns around his undocumented status haunted their relationship: “People think that I don’t deserve her just because [of] my situation. . . . They say I won’t be able to provide for her as other people can.”

Receiving DACA a year before his second interview changed Enrique's feelings: "I guess it gives me some type of confidence. It gives me that boost." He had quickly capitalized on his newfound employment authorization and got a job at a national shipping chain, almost doubling his salary to \$3,500 a month. Finally feeling economically stable, he proposed to his girlfriend. He credited this decision to receiving DACA: "I felt more [like] I would be able to take care of a family. Like being able to have more doors open to where I could get a better job and stuff like that. It made me feel more comfortable with making those types of decisions."

Like Enrique, most undocumented young adults negotiate multiple immigration status barriers as they date and make decisions about their relationships. Simultaneously, they face hegemonic gendered dating norms according to which men are expected to be providers and women dependent participants. Previous research by Joanna Dreby and Leah Schmalzbauer has established that dependent gender roles intersect with illegality's constraints to heighten first-generation undocumented women's dependence on their husbands, making them vulnerable to unequal relationship dynamics and even abuse.<sup>1</sup> I expand on this to trace how gendered illegality emerges early in relationships and evolves as they progress. Doing so reveals how gendered expectations also disrupt undocumented young men's family formation.

I focus here on how immigration status and gender jointly shape feelings about desirability, determine early dating activities, and can impede relationship advancement. Much of this revolves around the financial constraints produced by illegality and the nuance involved in negotiating the economic nature of men's provider expectations. These factors disproportionately disrupted men's dating experiences, increasing their risk of disengaging from family formation. In many cases, enduring consequences emerged as illegality pushed many men to stop dating, delay marriage, and/or feel inadequate. Receiving DACA eased dating, but few experienced the dramatic relationship impacts Enrique did, often because they had found ways to negotiate barriers or because the policy's timing did not align with their relationship trajectories. Overall, I demonstrate how enduring consequences emerge over the course of a relationship as couples attempt to align material barriers and gender ideologies to successfully establish, build, and solidify their romantic relationships.

#### FEELING UNDESIRABLE: GENDERED EXPECTATIONS

Most undocumented young adults and their citizen partners disregarded undocumented status and relied on romantic notions to explain their attraction to each other. They spoke primarily about personality, and to some extent physical characteristics, as markers of desirability. Many cited qualities like being "caring," "supportive," and "respectful." Like marriage myth counternarratives, this

romantic framing de-emphasized the role of undocumented status. Yet immigration-related barriers reshaped undocumented men's ability to meet gendered expectations and present themselves as desirable partners.

Many undocumented young men recognized that structural barriers, particularly economic ones, could make them appear undesirable. Rafael Montelongo remembered how he avoided revealing his status to his citizen girlfriend for four months: "I was really scared, and I was thinking in my head, She might not want you just 'cause you don't have papers. She probably thinks you have no future with her. She would have to work a lot more than if she went with another person. She would have to sacrifice more of her time." Rafael's fiancée, Jimena Santiago, confirmed that these thoughts ran through her head: "I felt . . . like, I don't know if I wanna stay with this person. It's gonna be hard, and I'm not ready for hard. . . . But then as I . . . kept on dating him, I was like, Well, that doesn't really matter. . . . He's really what I was looking for." Drawing on romantic narratives and confident in her own ability to achieve upward mobility, Jimena set aside Rafael's limitations.

Most undocumented young adults and their partners professed egalitarian ideals while holding traditional gendered expectations. Explaining this discrepancy, scholar Kathleen Gerson finds that young men and women aspire to flexible and egalitarian partnerships, but structural barriers prompt diverging practices. While women fear dependence and thus develop self-reliant strategies, men develop a neotraditional stance: they continue to imagine themselves as the breadwinner. They welcome their partner's economic contributions but prioritize their own work and expect their partner to handle housework and childcare.<sup>2</sup> These discrepancies emerge early in relationships as young men and women maintain traditionally gendered dating scripts: men take an active role as they initiate and plan for the date, often pick up the woman, and pay for all or most of the date. Women are dependent participants at all stages as they are expected to react to men's advances.<sup>3</sup> A recent survey of 17,607 unmarried heterosexuals found that women pay for some of the date, but not as much as men; 39 percent of women wished men would reject their offers to pay, and 44 percent were bothered when men expected them to help pay.<sup>4</sup> These traditional gendered expectations are most salient at relationship turning points such as initial dates, becoming exclusive, and proposing marriage.<sup>5</sup>

Material barriers constrain men's ability to perceive themselves and be perceived as desirable partners if they cannot perform these expected gender roles.<sup>6</sup> Cultural norms are key modes of reproducing exclusion by fostering negative social judgment and internalized feelings of inadequacy.<sup>7</sup> In this case, they help turn the material constraints associated with illegality into socioemotional barriers to family formation. Gendered norms thus set the stage for undocumented young men and women to experience illegality differently as they build romantic relationships.

GENDERED BARRIERS: NEGOTIATING IMMIGRATION  
STATUS WHEN DATING

Undocumented status may not be inherently undesirable, but it does create conditions that prevent positive self-presentation in relationships. Limited incomes and an inability to access a state-issued ID or driver's license constrain undocumented young adults' ability to participate in expected dating activities. These barriers emerge in gendered ways: women's gender expectations insulate them from having to negotiate most immigration status barriers, while men's expectations limit their ability to accommodate immigration-related constraints early in a relationship.

*"I'm Broke": The Persistent Weight of Gendered Provider  
Expectations on Men*

Low-income men of color often struggle to meet provider expectations and participate in family formation. Economic constraints, particularly unstable employment and unreliable earnings, undergird men's limited marriageability. Race compounds these concerns as men of color have declining job prospects and skyrocketing criminalization and incarceration rates.<sup>8</sup> Undocumented status further exacerbates these challenges by prohibiting access to formal employment, limiting them to low-income jobs with little opportunity for upward mobility despite education and training. They are effectively dependent on immigration policy changes to enable their economic mobility.

Although not representative, about three-quarters of the undocumented sample reported holding minimum-wage, service-sector jobs in restaurants, stores, and offices. Employed participants earned an average annual income of \$15,936 and said they had little financial flexibility; this is consistent with working a little less than 40 hours a week and earning \$8 an hour, then California's minimum wage.<sup>9</sup> Women, on average, earned about \$1,000 less a year than men because they worked about five hours less a week and often held jobs that paid less than men with equivalent levels of education. Higher levels of education translated into modestly higher pay (see table 3.1). Despite earning more, men were much more likely to cite their limited income as a dating constraint.

*"Maybe He Can't Provide": Feeling Undesirable.* Most undocumented men were concerned that their financial situations would signal their undesirability. Ivan Cardenas explained, "I have that fear that maybe she'll think less of me or in her head she'll think, Well, maybe he can't provide what I want in the long run." Working as a gardener severely limited his income to around \$1,000 a month and kept him living with his parents. He feared that he would never be able to provide for a family, keeping him from becoming more serious with the woman he had been seeing for almost a year.

TABLE 3.1 Employed participants' average annual income, weekly hours worked, and hourly pay by gender and education level (2011–2012)

	Mean annual income (\$)	Mean weekly hours worked	Mean estimated hourly wage (\$)
All participants ( <i>n</i> = 68)	15,936	36	8.90
By gender			
Men ( <i>n</i> = 36)	16,467	38	8.51
Women ( <i>n</i> = 32)	15,319	33	9.35
By education level			
High school diploma or less ( <i>n</i> = 23)	15,188	41	7.39
Some college education ( <i>n</i> = 10)	18,267	40	9.26
Currently enrolled ( <i>n</i> = 23)	13,161	29	9.02
Bachelor's degree or higher ( <i>n</i> = 12)	20,940	37	11.29
By gender and education level			
Men with a high school diploma or less ( <i>n</i> = 12)	16,450	42	7.66
Women with a high school diploma or less ( <i>n</i> = 11)	13,811	40	7.09
Men with some college education ( <i>n</i> = 6)	17,600	42	8.38
Women with some college education ( <i>n</i> = 4)	19,600	37	10.59
Men currently enrolled ( <i>n</i> = 13)	15,738	32	9.55
Women currently enrolled ( <i>n</i> = 10)	9,810	24	8.33
Men with a bachelor's degree or higher ( <i>n</i> = 5)	17,040	41	7.98
Women with a bachelor's degree or higher ( <i>n</i> = 7)	23,726	33	13.66

*Note:* Hours worked are reported only for participants who reported income. Hourly wage was estimated by dividing the annual income by 52 weeks and the number of hours worked per week. The sample size for income and hours worked per week is 67; one woman with some college education reported only an hourly wage.

Men also worried about how their lifestyle signaled economic instability. Josue Contreras-Ruiz, divorced and in his mid-20s, posited, “Living with my parents doesn’t make me stable. So again they’re look for a stable guy.” Aaron Ortiz, married and in his early 30s, commented, “Confidence and cleanliness. Clean shoes is what kind of gets a girl. . . . If a guy has dirty shoes, it’s like, no.” I glanced at his gleaming white Nikes; they not only signaled economic stability—his ability to afford new ones—but also distanced him from his muddy work boots. His self-presentation became a way to reframe his desirability.

Alternatively, women did not believe that their income, job, or living situation contributed to their desirability. Claudia Arellano, a single college graduate making \$1,600 a month as a waitress, explained, “[I’m doing] the online [dating] thing. . . . If a guy puts online [on his profile] like they work at a restaurant, it’s like, Ahhh [warning sign]. But if a girl puts it, the guy doesn’t even care. It’s like, Oh, whatever, she’s cute. . . . So I kind of feel like I can get away [with that] . . . a little bit more.” Women did not mention their living situation, and only a few connected

their limited income with an inability to conform to hegemonic beauty standards. For example, Juana Covarrubias, a single community college student who worked a few hours a week as a private tutor, noted that being unable “to buy whatever you want, like a new pair of shoes or certain clothes that you need, does affect how you see yourself. . . . You just have to wait for so long to get what you want.”

Once in relationships, women continued to feel unhindered by their economic situations. Karen Rodriguez, who worked at a fast-food restaurant making \$1,200 a month, explained that it was never an issue in her six-year relationship with a citizen because “he was the one that was going to provide.” Dependent expectations ensured that most of the undocumented women I spoke to did not believe that their economic status impeded their desirability or long-term relationship viability.

*“I Like to Pay”: Pressure to Provide.* Men strove to perform their provider role early in relationships. “I gotta pay,” Omar Valenzuela stated bluntly. “It’s just that traditional mentality. It’s up to the man to pay and the woman shouldn’t pay. I think out of all times we went out, she paid once. ’Cause she didn’t let me pay; she pulled her card quick.” Male citizen partners, like Lucas Maldonado, professed these same expectations: “I’m very old fashioned, and I like to pay.”

These convictions persist regardless of women’s actual expectations. Most men strove to meet unquestioned provider expectations, attempting to lower costs instead of asking their partner to help. Many opted for conventional activities—dinner, drinks, or movies—but selected cheaper venues or went out less frequently. Ivan Cardenas shared, “If I get my paycheck and I already paid my bills and all I have left is \$50, I’d rather tell her, ‘Let’s go out next week when I have more money.’ Or I say, ‘I can’t go out. I’m busy.’ Sometimes it’s a bad feeling when you go out and you can’t really buy everything you want.”

Alternatively, some men identified unconventional dating activities that were free or low cost. Abel León elaborated, “You have to always think out of the box. . . . I was dating this young lady, and we went hiking. There’s a waterfall in [the foothills] . . . so we went, and it was pretty good. In my backpack, I had a little bit of wine. . . . She was like, ‘Wow, that’s pretty cool!’ [She] was very impressed. And I didn’t spend a lot of money.” Paco Barrera described taking dates to a local café that hosted free poetry events. This not only allowed him to sidestep his financial limitations, but it also made women “think you’re all cultured and this cool guy.” These alternative activities were particularly beneficial early on in relationships because they allowed men to portray themselves positively without breaking the bank.

Finally, some men strove to simply spend time together at no cost. Alejandro Torres, who had been dating his girlfriend for two years, explained, “When I don’t have money, I just let her know: ‘You know what, I don’t have money right now.’ . . . And we just stay home, watch a movie . . . or, I have guinea pigs. Sometimes

we just play with them.” He believed his partner was fine with this: “She’s told me, ‘OK, I understand because you’re paying your school.’” When partners have already established interest, desirability becomes less tied to going out.<sup>10</sup> Such renegotiations allowed men to continue to spend time with their partners and advance their relationship without incurring significant costs.

Although the undocumented women I interviewed had lower or comparable incomes to the men, none discussed limited funds as a barrier to dating or developed parallel negotiation strategies. For some, like Patricia Santamaria, women’s dependent positions erased financial concerns: “I’m a girl. I have no problem with a guy paying for everything. I would make him pay for everything.” Others, like Lili Moreno, expressed more egalitarian gender roles: “In terms of who pays, we’re pretty equal. Usually it’s a trade, if someone pays one day, the other person pays the other day.” Although egalitarianism increases the prospect that women’s low income could limit dating, this did not occur, in part because their financial burden was halved. They also selectively adhered to their own egalitarian expectations—paying only when they could or covering the cheaper portion of the date—as men did not expect them to pay. Ultimately, women’s dependent gender role created slight spaces of agency when dating in uncertain financial situations.

*“You Wanna Have Your Own Place”: Barriers to Building Intimacy.* As couples sought to solidify their relationships, earlier financial barriers transformed and new ones emerged. Many single or dating participants were living with their parents and siblings. This economic management strategy hampered their ability to build intimacy. Siblings Felipe and Lili Moreno separately explained that they both lived at home because they could not afford to live on their own and wanted to help their undocumented parents. Their three-bedroom house was cramped; Felipe and his two brothers shared a room while Lili slept in the living room since her bedroom had been rented out for extra income. Felipe felt this was “rough” on his sex life: “I can’t take girls in there. Obviously, my girlfriend’s been in my house. But in the six months, we’ve only had sex once.” Many couples reported having sex less frequently than desired because they had to wait until their families were out.

Lili delved into how her lack of privacy limited intimacy with the man she was seeing: “Everything takes practice in terms of learning about each other; not only what will please us physically, but our emotions. Having that space to even have intimate conversations . . . to create a safe space for each other is important.” Lili disentangled the physical and emotional role of sex in romantic relationships, noting how her living situation disrupted both. Research shows that both are important as sexual satisfaction significantly predicts emotional intimacy and mediates couples’ assessment of relationship satisfaction.<sup>11</sup>

Most women did not believe this was an insurmountable barrier; several men, however, explained that being unable to provide an intimate space could highlight their inability to meet provider expectations. Although his previous girlfriend had her own apartment, Zen Cruz did not feel comfortable there: “As long as her roommate was home, we weren’t gonna [have sex]. They each had their own room, but the walls are paper thin, and you don’t wanna bring that ruckus to somebody else’s house.” These are concerns that any person may have, but Zen tied it to larger issues of desirability and financial stability: “It’s a little emasculating. You wanna have your own place.” Similarly, Chris Moreno, Felipe and Lili’s brother, commented, “You don’t want to be 28 and still living with your parents. How are you going to become a man and do your own thing?”

A common management strategy included finding spaces outside their homes, such as traveling or getting a hotel room locally. Chris joked, “That’s why God invented hotels!” when asked if sharing a room with his two brothers limited his sex life. Indeed, Lili noted that she and her new boyfriend have “done a lot of getaways” so that they could have privacy. Receiving DACA and having a stable, salaried job ensured that she had the money and flexibility to do this. Low incomes, however, often limited this option. Josue Contreras-Ruiz reflected, “I do remember one time I hooked up with this girl. . . . I took her out, went to dinner, then went to a hotel. . . . [I spent] my lunch money for the week [on the room]. . . . So I had to resort to [eating] Cup O’Noodles and stuff like that.”

Travel also represented an opportunity to build nonsexual intimacy. Diego Ibáñez detailed, “One of the things [I want] is to be with a partner that 10 years from now, you can say, ‘Hey, remember when we were doing this? Remember when we were changing our tire for the first time?’” By providing an opportunity to spend quality time with a romantic partner, travel—even to nearby destinations—symbolized an opportunity to build memories and evaluate the relationship’s viability: “You get a better idea of who your partner is and if you really want to be with your partner.” Yet this opportunity is limited for undocumented young adults who cannot travel internationally and feel deportation risks when traveling domestically. Additionally, Diego pointed to the high expense, and Julio Medina invoked many undocumented immigrants’ limited job flexibility: “I couldn’t take a day off in order to go somewhere because that meant not getting paid that day.” Julio joked that he barely had time to do our interview because of his long hours as a community organizer. While undocumented young women faced these same barriers, none mentioned them as relationship obstacles.

#### *Driver’s Licenses and ID Cards: Gendered Barriers to Going Out*

At the time of my initial interviews, California, like most states, did not allow undocumented immigrants to obtain an identification card or driver’s license—documents held by approximately 95 percent of the eligible population.<sup>12</sup> Most participants were driving unlicensed and using alternative forms of

identification—*matriculas consulares* (identification cards issued by the consulate) or passports from their country of origin. This restricted dating activities as undocumented young adults tried to limit their driving and risked rejection when pursuing activities that required proof of age. These barriers emerged in gendered ways and were more likely to harm undocumented men's relationships.

*"I Try to Avoid Driving": Men's Struggle without a Driver's License.* Both undocumented and citizen men and women ascribed to traditional dating norms for men. Gilbert Morales shared, "I don't like that [my dates would pick me up] because I feel like I should be the one. . . . My mom always taught me not to . . . [have] the lady doing everything." Many accepted this norm. Lili Moreno remembered that men automatically drove. "When I didn't have a car," she said, "I think the guys were the ones who supported me. Picking me up, taking me places and stuff like that." In most cases, women appreciated this dating script because it allowed them to avoid the risks of unlicensed driving without having to reveal their immigration status.

Faced with their own and their partner's gendered expectations, most undocumented men privately accommodated this barrier by driving without a license, subjecting themselves to financially and physically risky situations. Omar Valenzuela recounted,

[My girlfriend's] like, "I don't know where you're taking me, so you drive." It's kind of like the man's role. . . . It does come up [that it's risky]. Especially after . . . I got pulled over. . . . That's why I try to avoid driving. But then when you're with somebody [and] crazy about them, a fear of status, everything, goes out the window.

Performing his role, Omar was pulled over and given a \$1,000 ticket for driving without a license. This could have been even more expensive if his car had been towed and subject to thousands of dollars in impound fees.<sup>13</sup> These tickets and fines are deep economic risks for undocumented young adults. Further, potential collaboration between local police and immigration agents raises the threat of deportation in these instances.<sup>14</sup> Even though Omar had a citizen girlfriend who was licensed and knew about his immigration status, unquestioned gender roles led him and many undocumented men to risk driving without a license.

Some undocumented men attempted to avoid these risks by asking their citizen partners to drive. Zen Cruz, a single man in his late 20s, explained that he asked his dates to pick him up, but "I try to do the most for them too. I fill up their [gas] tank. I pay when we go eat. . . . Let's get drinks; I'll pay for the drinks. Let's go to the movies; I'll pay for the movies. . . . So I kinda make up for that." These strategies do not appear to disrupt desirability when men still perform some traditional gender roles and citizen women partners can frame driving as doing their share. They can, however, generate conflict in some mixed-status relationships when women resist renegotiating gender roles. Cruz Vargas described his citizen girlfriend's reaction: "I don't wanna feel like this [insecure and unsafe] every day.

[I tell her,] ‘You can drive. You can actually legally drive. So why don’t you just drive.’ She’s like, ‘Oh. Well, I’m tired. I don’t wanna drive.’ So I’ll drive.” Though she would sometimes drive, Cruz was frequently unable to avoid risk-taking.

A few undocumented men refused to take these risks and found that this made them look undesirable, especially when their partner was not licensed or did not have a car. Erick Godinez explained, “[Girls,] they ask me, ‘Why don’t you get a car?’ They know I could get a car, but I don’t want to do it because I don’t want to risk it. . . . They get tired of going in a taxi or a bus.” The normalization of unlicensed driving made it difficult for him to convincingly avoid driving; he believed his choice pushed several women to break up with him. Thus, gendered expectations force undocumented men to choose between the risk of driving without a license or sacrificing a potential relationship, especially in sprawling urban spaces like Southern California or rural areas where driving is necessary.<sup>15</sup> Living in cities with normalized use of public transportation might increase undocumented young adults’ flexibility to (re)negotiate these expectations.

Depending on a partner for rides can insulate undocumented young adults from deportation risks, but it may create other risky situations. Although no women spoke about this, Alonso Guerra, a single gay man, explained,

When I was living with my family, my sex life was mostly anybody who was willing to pick me up and take me to their place. . . . It also gave them the wheel in the relationship, or the encounter. Where I couldn’t really displease them because then I’d be stranded somewhere. . . . It just gave them the power, and that’s always very dangerous or unpleasant at times.

No other participants spoke about experiencing coercion related to their inability to drive. But women’s higher likelihood of being in a dependent situation increases the possibility that they may encounter such risks.

*“Are They Going to Take My Passport?”: Women’s Struggle without a State-Issued ID.* Not having state-issued identification, either in the form of a driver’s license or a California ID card, limited undocumented young adults’ participation in age-restricted activities, such as entering clubs and bars, or purchasing alcohol. Alma Molina recounted a recent experience when out with her boyfriend:

We went to a Buffalo Wild Wings, and they didn’t accept my passport [to order] a drink. And we just got up and left. . . . I was like, How is it possible that I go through TSA [airport security] and they have no questions, and you can’t even give me a drink because you think my ID is fake?

Such denials were common for those who used *matrículas*, but foreign passports were usually accepted because of the stringent security measures used to prevent counterfeiting. While Alma tried to brush this off as “not a big deal,” it clearly disrupted their date and determined their future activity choices.

Men face less risk of being denied access; their active dating scripts enable them to select activities and establishments, allowing them to somewhat manage their lack of state-issued ID. Cruz Vargas detailed how he navigated this: “I’m very good with words, so I’d just work my way around it. . . . Let’s say some girl wanted to go somewhere. I’ll just be like, ‘I heard the place is wack. . . . I know a better place.’ . . . And then I’ll just convince them . . . [to go where] I know I can go.” Cruz, like most men, embraced his gendered role as courter, and used this as a source of agency to privately manage his lack of a California ID.

Alternatively, women’s dependent gender roles disempowered them by fostering situations in which they risked being denied access or outed as undocumented. Julieta Castillo described her anxieties when preparing for a date:

Are they [venue staff] going to take my passport? Are they going to give me crap about it? . . . [Will they] go through it and see if there is a visa or not? Sometimes they’ll be assholes. . . . And then there’s times they’ll be nice and . . . it will be fine. But it’s an anxiety. . . . The embarrassment it’s going to cost because they are going to put you on blast. Or how are you going to explain, “Oh wait, I can’t go in.” [Or being asked,] “Why don’t you have a California ID?” So I hate it! I hate it!

Like Julieta, most women reported anxiety about being unable to participate in the activity their partner planned. Even when a non-California ID was accepted, it raised questions that required them to either reveal their undocumented status or lie. Neither is preferable when trying to develop a relationship.

Often, women developed strategies to avoid rejection. Julieta recalled, “If I didn’t know the place or if I heard of other people that they can’t get in, then I would just avoid it.” Tanya Diaz explained, “Sometimes I’d be like, ‘Oh, I’ll meet you there.’ ’Cause I didn’t want to go there and have to show my ID [in front of my date].” Other women suggested alternative activities. Unlike men who could simply plan activities that avoided risk of rejection, women had to negotiate their lack of a state-issued ID in public, and this was not guaranteed to work.

Despite their anxieties, none of the women I interviewed reported being rejected by a partner when they were denied entrance or made to reveal their undocumented status. Mercedes Valdez recounted when her ID was rejected on her first date with a citizen man:

We wanted to go out to a bar . . . and it was a cool place he had been to, and he wanted to show me the place. But I got denied because of my matrícula. . . . And I was like, “Welcome to my world.” . . . I think it showed a lot about him too, though, [that] even though I got denied, he was like, “Well, let’s go somewhere else.” . . . I think that’s what made me get more attracted to him.

Though embarrassed, Mercedes found that his supportive reaction strengthened her attraction. Indeed, Dante Chavez, a citizen partner, recalled a similar incident in which his undocumented partner was carded. When asked how he felt about

her ID being rejected, he was adamant—“I don’t care.” Although women are denied entrance and feel stigmatized, most of their partners do not see this as a testament to their undesirability. Ultimately, not having an ID was significantly less consequential when establishing a relationship, especially when compared to the fallout of men’s unmet driving expectations.

#### STRIKING EVEN: RENEGOTIATING GENDER EXPECTATIONS IN LIGHT OF IMMIGRATION STATUS

Despite early potential pitfalls, most undocumented participants had been able to establish a committed romantic relationship, at the time of their interview or in the past. Doing so required that the couple continually accommodate the tension between gender expectations and illegality. For some men, this meant simply performing provider roles, regardless of the risk. But most men and women relied on romantic notions that partners should support each other, which included helping manage immigration-related constraints. Alma Molina, who has been dating her boyfriend for eight years, and Zen Cruz, who was single but dated frequently, explained:

*Alma:* I think if the person really wants to date you . . . if that person really cares about you, they’re gonna be willing to drive for you, or pay for you, or whatever.

*Zen:* I’m thinking—if they really like me for me, they wouldn’t have a problem driving in the first place anyway.

In many cases, partners helped—paying for dates, driving, making concessions about activities. This happened relatively seamlessly in relationships between undocumented women and citizen men as immigration status did not disrupt the performance of gendered expectations in these cases. Yet relationships between undocumented men and citizen women or between two undocumented partners required the active accommodation of immigration status limitations, since both had to align dating roles with gender ideologies. If these could not be reconciled, conflict emerged.

Mixed-status couples accommodated reversed gender roles, minimizing potential conflict by developing *strategic gender egalitarianism*. They adapted their dating scripts to fit the limitations posed by undocumented status, giving the illusion of an egalitarian relationship without changing underlying gender ideologies.<sup>16</sup> In most instances, this negotiation happened smoothly when citizen women, like Jimena Santiago, recognized it as the rational option: “If we get pulled over, I’m gonna feel bad because I have a license and I’m not the one driving.” Like other citizen women, she imagined this renegotiation as doing her share: “When we would go out, I would usually drive and he would pay. Or sometimes if he would drive, I would pay. So we always had it kind of even.” Their arrangement was purely strategic, as she explained: “Before [DACA], I would help him more because I knew that he was limited.” His receiving DACA enabled them to revert

to more traditional roles: “Now [with DACA] it’s more that he pays most of the time ’cause he’s able to afford it more. . . . Now it’s more on him.” Those couples who seek to be strategic about the benefits and drawbacks of their various immigration statuses often developed more egalitarian practices to manage illegality; however, underlying gender norms remained as men anticipated and desired to return to their provider role when their legal and/or financial situations changed.

Couples composed of two undocumented partners similarly practiced strategic gender egalitarianism to manage their shared limitations. Marina Balderas shared how she and her boyfriend Omar Valenzuela, both DACA recipients, shifted to more egalitarian dating practices: “At the beginning, he would pay for mostly everything, but then when I started working at the hospital [as a nursing assistant] . . . his job was really slow. So then I started paying for a lot of stuff. So we would kind of do it together. . . . If he has it, he pays, and if I have it, I pay.” This shift required their open negotiation of traditional gender norms:

He was like, “I feel like I’m always paying. . . . I don’t feel support when I don’t have a job.” . . . And for me, I was like, A guy’s supposed to pay. [But] he’s . . . like, “I see you like my partner. I don’t see you like my girlfriend.” . . . So it did change. I was like, Oh, damn. And then I started paying for a lot of stuff. And then now he tells me, “I feel like you’re always paying.” I’m like, Oh my god.

Omar reflected on their current arrangement:

It’s tricky because in our culture, it’s like, if you can’t provide, you’re not a man, you know? Right now, I’m kinda struggling with that because before when we were busy at work, it was like every weekend we would go out, like restaurants, movies, anywhere. . . . It was never like, Oh, I didn’t have money this weekend. And, like, this whole month, it’s been like that. It kinda sucks ’cause it’s out of my control, but she’s working, so she pays.

He framed this arrangement as temporary and anticipated making up for it when his new job at an upscale restaurant would start to give him more hours: “[Then] it’s whatever she wants, new watch, new bag, new whatever, no problem.” Marina and Omar’s case suggests that strategic gender egalitarianism may be effective in avoiding external and internal conflict over an inability to perform traditional roles. It enables undocumented men to draw on egalitarian notions to see themselves as progressive partners, rather than as undesirable men who cannot fully provide.

Many undocumented men struggled to accept strategic renegotiations because it made them feel dependent. David Soto passionately recounted a fight he had with an ex-boyfriend:

We got in a fight at Taco Bell, and I was like, “No! I will buy my own Taco Bell!” . . . But he was like, “Don’t worry about it. You only have \$20. Save your money. I will pay for it.” But he was [always] paying for everything, [and] I was like, “No! No, I can pay for it! I have money!” And that was me, the undocumented David, saying, I can provide for myself.

David recognized that paying for tacos was his partner's way of sympathizing. Still, he struggled to accept his help after years of feeling infantilized and dependent because of his undocumented status. Iliana Guzman recognized that negotiating gender roles may be logical, but it is often hard for men to accept. She recounted how her ex-partner, who was also undocumented, struggled with the logic that Iliana should drive because she held a valid out-of-state driver's license. They argued regularly because she believed he was trying to assert his independence by driving.

In a few cases, undocumented women struggled to accept help because it required them to renegotiate their own gender ideologies, which prioritized independence. Research suggests that most young women fear being dependent on their partner.<sup>17</sup> These aspirations made it difficult for them to allow a citizen partner to help. While this did not have significant consequences for their early relationships, it could infuse stress into a relationship, as I show in the next chapter.

Citizen women also grappled with renegotiating gender ideologies, especially when they felt it extended past egalitarianism to place disproportional responsibility on them. Isabel Montoya, the citizen wife of an undocumented man pursuing legalization, remembered how she began to pay after they finished high school: "I was able to get my first job, and he really couldn't. So that's when I started having to be the one to pay for everything." She was the first to buy a car, leading her to "always be the one driving." She admitted, "There would be some times where I would get really angry about it. Like, I knew I shouldn't, but it would get frustrating." She would fantasize that "it'd be nice to be driven around once in a while" or wonder what it would be like if "my boyfriend had money to take me out when I'm broke." In part, Isabel's willingness to revise dating scripts stemmed from her desire to develop a more egalitarian relationship, but her frustration emerged from consistently doing most of the work.

Women who found themselves doing a disproportionate amount of relationship work were faced with a critical question: Do I stay or do I go? Isabel poured a lot of energy into helping mediate her partner's undocumented status. Had this ever made her think she should not be with him? She admitted, "Honestly, yes. That did cross my mind." She ultimately decided to stay and framed the relationship as egalitarian because she expected that he would resume his provider role as soon as they legalized his status. Her actions reflect those Joanna Dreby documents among first-generation, mixed-status couples; she finds that many citizen women accept the extra responsibilities of mediating illegality for undocumented men. This creates a triple burden because they also continue to do gendered household labor to protect their partner's masculinity.<sup>18</sup>

Some citizens, however, chose to break up with their undocumented partner when they decided that taking on these roles was incompatible with their expectations. Daniel Hernandez described how he understood his ex-girlfriend's decision:

She finished school, even grad school too. . . . [She] had her stuff together. And I was still in [community college] . . . working part-time [at a fast-food restaurant],

going to school full-time. The whole me-not-being-independent thing just started becoming too much for her. 'Cause she's the one driving everywhere, and I didn't even know how to drive. . . . [She's] like, "I'm investing more time in this than you are and sometimes more money." 'Cause I'd be like, "Hey, I don't have money right now." . . . I think she realized that she might end up having to support me in some way while I finish school. . . . So she's like, "No, it's over."

Focusing on all the relationship work she did, Daniel's partner was unable to reconcile their relationship with her own expectations. Seeing no end in sight, she marked Daniel as undesirable and broke up with him.

#### ENDURING CONSEQUENCES: MEN'S DISRUPTED FAMILY FORMATION

Despite strategic renegotiations, exclusionary dating experiences often piled up as relationships progressed. Scholar Kathleen Gerson finds that low-income men of color are the most likely to opt out of family formation, staying single because of their economic uncertainty.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, financial concerns and men's inability to meet economic-provider expectations undergird men and women's desires to put off marriage.<sup>20</sup> Undocumented status further confounds these challenges by making economic mobility unlikely. Thus, some undocumented young men stopped dating when they repeatedly came up against barriers related to their immigration status, resulting in their rejection. Others successfully negotiated illegality in early relationships but then delayed marriage or struggled to feel like good husbands because of heightened provider expectations.

#### *"I've Been through Hell": Giving Up on Love*

Some men reported that they avoided dating after repeated rejection for immigration-related issues. After being dumped, Daniel avoided dating for over two years. Jesus Perez suggested that this avoidance can be unintentional, emerging when men do not have the financial stability to consistently pay for dates: "It makes me afraid. . . . Let's say my [hypothetical] partner wants to go out, and she asks me to go out. I don't want to say, 'I don't have any money.' [It] makes me embarrassed, I guess. I want to be the one in power." Jesus noted that he had not been on a date in two years as he waited to be able to meet his own, and his potential partner's, financial expectations. He suggested that this was unique to undocumented young adults because citizen men can "use their credit cards" to make ends meet. Still others, like Abel León, elected to date casually and not "take it so seriously . . . [because] I don't feel confident enough. Especially because of money." As undocumented men date, smaller incidents and negative feelings accumulate to discourage their serious pursuit of long-term partnerships. This is consistent with other research findings that men's sense of prestige, self-worth, and romantic desirability is tied to their earnings and work.<sup>21</sup>

Undocumented status compounds these concerns when it presents seemingly insurmountable barriers that lead some men to internalize their undesirability after repeated rejection. This was particularly common when they were unable to meet their own and their partner's gendered expectations. Leo Campos explained that he frequently felt "less than" when dating:

*Leo:* Usually they drove. But then, I didn't feel like . . . I don't know if that's the machismo part of me—I would be like, "No, no, I'll meet you there." I'll freaking take the bus, I'll walk, because I didn't feel comfortable.

*Laura:* Having them pick you up?

*Leo:* Yeah, I just didn't. It was like, even though I'm not a machismo-type guy, I just felt like that's something that the guy's supposed to do. . . . I would never let them pay. I'm not the type that will let the girl pay. I'm paying for everything. . . .

*Laura:* So you would meet them there and then—

*Leo:* No, most of the time I'd just break down. "OK, pick me up." . . . But then I'd be sitting in the car all depressed, and they'd be like, "Why do you not want to come out with me?"

Although women were willing to help out by driving or paying their share, Leo was unwilling to renegotiate his expectations to match his limited employment at a fast-food restaurant and fear of driving without a license. Further, recognizing his future inability to provide, he rationalized that he was inherently undesirable: "I don't want to hold her back. So I rather be by myself. If I'm gonna have this crappy life, then I rather just be doing it myself going through it and not bring somebody else down with me."

Leo eventually stopped dating after he was repeatedly broken up with because of his immigration status. Unlike most participants who perked up with interest when I moved interviews toward discussions of dating, Leo simply replied, "nonexistent."

I don't call them dates because the minute we went out . . . the minute they found out my situation, it's like, "Oh, I never liked you." So if they never liked me, then it wasn't a date. . . . Even though we might have made out, but apparently you don't like me. Apparently you never liked me, my mistake. . . . [I've stopped dating] because it wasn't just one or two girls. . . . If I would count between the time I was 18 to like now [that I'm 27], like 20 to 25 girls have rejected me like that.

Recounting a few dates in detail, Leo clarified that he and his prospective partners struggled to accept how his status would limit both dating activities and their potential future. He blamed his prospective partners, but these negative experiences were likely exacerbated by his own resistance to renegotiating gender roles.

Internalizing this repeated rejection, Leo was one of the few respondents who believed that he would never establish a permanent partnership:

I'm less and less open to it [a relationship] because I've been through hell and back, so I don't want to go through it. I don't want to emotionally invest in someone and have it be the same outcome that I've known for years. It's kind of hard. If you keep touching the stove and you keep getting burned, eventually you'll be like, "Hey, I'm not gonna do that again."

Indeed, two years later, at his second interview, he still had not dated anyone. He had even rejected a few women. He worried that "since my life is kind of in limbo," even after receiving DACA, that he didn't want to put himself in a provider position.

Leo's experiences are not representative, though. Many men renegotiated their gender expectations and found women who supported this. However, his story demonstrates the cumulative effect that gendered expectations and immigration status barriers can have on relationships. Repeated or extremely painful rejections can have long-term consequences as undocumented young adults internalize these experiences and abandon attempts to build permanent, loving relationships.

*"It Kind of Holds You Back": Feeling Unprepared  
and Avoiding Marriage*

Many men successfully dated only to find that gendered expectations reemerged as a problem when they considered marriage. Joaquin Salas, who was single and almost 30, explained,

You tend to think a little bit about what you have to offer to that person. And obviously that becomes a little worrying in your mind when you're not here legally. It kind of holds you back a little from actually getting married or something. You think that . . . you're not a legal person and you won't be able to offer good things to that other person, like stability or a house.

Although many men negotiated financial barriers effectively while dating, their established strategies—canceling a date or finding a cheaper option—do not transfer to fulfilling breadwinner expectations. Although most women expected and desired to work, men did not consider this when weighing whether they could sustain a family after marriage.

Women, though, insisted that their financial situations would not affect their marriage decisions. Most women held gendered expectations that they would be financially (inter)dependent on their husbands, either contributing to the household income or being stay-at-home wives and mothers. Yet, Tanya Diaz was one of the few who believed that her immigration status and its financial limitations could cause marital tensions: "I'm going to be a financial struggle to them if my car gets taken away." Earning \$1,200 a month as an office assistant, she worried that

she couldn't "contribute as much." Despite this, she had not considered delaying marriage, in part because her dependent role did not require her to alleviate the financial burdens her status might place on her partner.

Rafael Montelongo provided a clear example of how immigration status, particularly economic barriers, affect marriage decisions. In our first interview, he shared that he avoids talking with his citizen girlfriend about marriage. He noted that this is mostly because she has high expectations: "She wants me to take her from her dad[']s house] to [our] house. I don't even have a house! She wants me to buy all the furniture and all that stuff. In my head, I'm just seeing that as pretty much impossible right now. I can barely afford to live by myself [in a rented room] and pay for school." Rafael's two part-time jobs at fast-food restaurants did not allow him to meet her or his own provider expectations on the \$1,200 he earned a month. "In the future, if I have a job as an engineer, maybe. But I don't know, that's in the future."

Postponing this decision was straining their three-and-a-half-year relationship. "She gets impatient," he noted, when he tried to talk to her about the pressure he felt:

*Rafael:* She says dumb stuff, like "I should look for another boyfriend." I'm like, "Fine, you should." But we go back, just little fights here and there.

*Laura:* Do you ever think that maybe she will go find somebody else?

*Rafael:* Like, in my head, I don't mind. Just 'cause if it makes you happy, why not. But I think if I wait too much [longer], I think she will [leave].

He got her to agree to put off marriage discussions until they finished college the next year. He worried, "Even by then, I don't think I'm gonna have enough money to even get married." In many cases, immigration status barriers and gendered expectations led undocumented men to delay marriage. This endangered their long-term romantic relationships.

*"I Haven't Felt like a 100 Percent Husband": Struggling to Meet Provider Expectations*

Some undocumented men had married despite their status. Buffered by romantic feelings that it was "time" to marry, they set aside their fears that they could not meet the intensified provider expectations that awaited them as husbands. Tomás Fernandez proposed to his wife in their early 20s after they had been friends for a year and dated for another year. He proposed because he felt it was "the right time." He remembered that they had "the same goals" and wanted to "start striving and working together to reach those goals together." Yet he did not feel as if he were ready to become a husband: "Not a hundred percent ready" because of "the economics part. There's going to be things you're not going to be able to provide. But at the same time, you know that if you keep working hard, that it is going to happen." Specifically, he felt "stuck" in his job as a low-level manager

at a fast-food restaurant and worried that he was not making enough to build a stable home.

Despite trying to ignore it, Tomás's low socioeconomic status plagued their relationship. He reflected on the issues that led to their separation after six years: "Some of the things she would say was the economics. That she wouldn't see any movement. She would see we were stuck in the same place. And she would give up. . . . I used to work crappy hours. And I wouldn't make enough." In these cases, husbands' intensified provider expectations did not prevent marriage, but they did feed conflict.

Like Tomás, Aaron Ortiz did not let his inability to provide discourage his decision to marry. Though he saw no threat of separation, his low income made him doubt his performance as a husband:

*Aaron:* There's some things that I'm missing. . . . I haven't felt like a 100 percent husband because there's certain things I can't provide yet.

*Interviewer:* Like what?

*Aaron:* Like a home. Like fun stuff.

Unable to obtain DACA, Aaron continued to work as a landscaper earning \$2,600 a month. He wrestled with the idea that he, his wife, and their daughter continued to share a bedroom in a house they shared with family members. He also aspired to buy an RV so that they could go camping together and have other family adventures. "There's a lot of things," he lamented, "that I'm missing to become that person."

#### "IT'S EASIER": DACA FACILITATES MEN'S RELATIONSHIP TRANSITIONS

DACA transformed illegality as recipients obtained work permits and benefits like state-issued driver's licenses and ID cards. David Soto explained how this removed barriers to family formation:

I can talk about where I work. I can pay for dinner. I can buy a drink without having to worry about taking out my matrícula. . . . I can drive. I can drop [them] off. . . . The biggest shift is I don't have to immediately divulge that I am undocumented. Because when I am paying for that bill or when I am taking out my California ID or when I am picking you up, none of that [undocumented status] is going to be obvious to you.

The employed DACA recipients I interviewed reported substantial changes in their economic situations, as their average income increased by almost \$500 a month, reaching \$21,900 annually. This is because they averaged working three hours more a week and earning \$2.78 more an hour. The wage gap between men and women increased as men saw greater changes, earning on average \$6,442 more a year than women because they worked an average of nine hours more a week and often held

TABLE 3.2. Employed DACA recipients' average annual income, weekly hours worked, and hourly pay by gender and education level (2014–2015)

	Mean annual income (\$)		Mean weekly hours worked		Mean estimated hourly wage (\$)	
	With DACA	Amount changed compared to 2011–2012 data	With DACA	Amount changed compared to 2011–2012 data	With DACA	Amount changed compared to 2011–2012 data
All participants ( <i>n</i> = 59)	21,900	5,964	39	3	11.68	2.78
By gender						
Men ( <i>n</i> = 33)	24,739	8,272	43	5	12.31	3.80
Women ( <i>n</i> = 26)	18,297	2,978	34	1	10.93	1.58
By education level						
High school diploma or less ( <i>n</i> = 11)	22,233	7,045	45	4	10.36	2.97
Some college education ( <i>n</i> = 20)	22,037	3,770	39	-1	12.40	3.14
Currently enrolled ( <i>n</i> = 13)	16,187	3,026	35	6	9.02	0
Bachelor's degree or higher ( <i>n</i> = 15)	26,427	5,487	38	1	13.91	2.62
By gender and education level						
Men with a high school diploma or less ( <i>n</i> = 6)	25,800	9,350	51	9	11.60	3.94
Women with a high school diploma or less ( <i>n</i> = 5)	17,952	4,141	38	-2	9.12	2.03
Men with some college education ( <i>n</i> = 12)	25,900	8,300	42	0	12.66	4.28
Women with some college education ( <i>n</i> = 8)	16,241	-3,359	32	0	11.98	1.39
Men currently enrolled ( <i>n</i> = 6)	18,600	2,862	45	13	9.25	-0.30
Women currently enrolled ( <i>n</i> = 7)	14,119	4,309	29	5	8.87	0.54
Men with a bachelor's degree or higher ( <i>n</i> = 9)	26,578	9,538	39	-2	14.00	6.12
Women with a bachelor's degree or higher ( <i>n</i> = 6)	26,200	2,474	37	4	13.78	0.12

Note: For 2014–15 data, hours worked are reported only for participants who reported income. Hourly wage was estimated by dividing the annual income by 52 weeks and the number of hours worked per week. The sample size for hours worked per week is 49; one or two people within seven of the gender and educational-level categories did not report hours worked. The sample size for average hourly wage is 50; one woman with some college education reported an hourly wage in addition to her income. Amount increased was calculated based on data reported in table 3.1.

jobs that paid more than women with equivalent levels of education. Higher levels of education translated into higher pay with relatively similar improvements in hourly wage, with the exception of those in college who continued to earn around minimum wage (see table 3.2). Out of every five DACA recipients, approximately two reported working in the same or a similar type of job, one moved to a self-described “better” job usually within the service sector, one entered professional employment, and one forwent employment to pursue educational opportunities. About three-quarters obtained a driver’s license, and all the others had a California ID card or were in the process of applying for a license. Although DACA lessened illegality’s everyday consequences, its impact on family formation varied based on where participants were in their relationships and the extent to which gendered illegality had already determined their relationship trajectories.

Men were most likely to experience markedly transformed relationship trajectories if they received DACA at a critical transition point in their relationship, allowing them to meet gendered expectations. As Rafael described earlier, pressure to marry could endanger long-term romantic relationships when men sought to delay marriage until they could meet provider expectations. In Rafael’s case, I left our first interview suspecting that his relationship was doomed. Two years later, he happily shared that their wedding was a month away.

Rafael was granted DACA about a year after our first interview. While finishing up his bachelor’s degree, he found stable employment as an engineer making \$3,200 a month, almost triple what he had made working in fast food. Soon after this, he proposed. His fiancée reflected, “I’m literally thankful because of the DACA, or else he wouldn’t have a job right now. We wouldn’t be able to get married. That would have delayed a lot of things. ’Cause we wanted to get married since a long time ago. But we were like, We don’t have the money for that. You don’t have a job and [are] not stable.” Rafael also suggested that DACA made him feel confident advancing their relationship: “With DACA . . . I am going to be able to provide income that is sufficient enough for both of us, and her not [to] work.” He looked forward to becoming the breadwinner when she returned to school for her master’s degree.

Rafael and Enrique (in the introduction of this chapter) were the only two participants who reported that DACA dramatically shifted their ability to transition into marriage. It brought financial stability that allowed them to continue the family formation process because they could meet their own and their partner’s expectations. If it had not been implemented when it was, their relationships would likely have floundered.

A few single undocumented men experienced substantial changes in their family formation trajectories because DACA inspired significant life changes that helped combat their underlying feelings of undesirability. Felipe Moreno reported persistent singlehood and long-term unemployment in his first interview. After obtaining DACA protections, he used his work permit to find employment as a

car salesman earning approximately \$3,000 a month, obtain a driver's license, and purchase a car. Receiving DACA changed how he felt about himself as a potential romantic partner:

Back in the day [before DACA], [I felt] a little bit [bad]. Like, I'm not going to be able to do this or that. Or I'm not going to be able to have a better-paying job. But now [with DACA], I think it's more understandable. . . . [A girl] wouldn't trip out so hard. If I just tell her I have nothing, [she'd say,] "Oh shit, nah, I can't do that." [But] now I can work, I can drive. . . . A partner would be more like, OK, [that's] not too bad.

Felipe and a few of the other men who had internalized their undesirability found that DACA improved their ability to date. Indeed, Felipe felt that potential partners would no longer see his status as "an uphill battle." These types of transformational impacts were most common among those who struggled significantly to meet gendered expectations and thus had avoided dating. Their newfound stability made them feel like more desirable partners, and DACA emerged early enough in their romantic lives that they had not yet given up on finding a partner.

Unlike Felipe, most single undocumented young men or those in emerging relationships felt that DACA did not necessarily redirect their family formation trajectories. They had already found ways to negotiate illegality when dating so that DACA mostly expanded potential dating activities and fostered more enjoyable experiences. Obtaining a work permit allowed Alonso Guerra to move from being an unemployed college graduate to having two part-time jobs. This improved his romantic relationship: "I had a lot more income. . . . We didn't have to go eat dollar tacos every time [we went out]. We could go to different places. We could go to museums. We could go do a lot more fun things." DACA's employment authorization created financial flexibility that allowed many men to afford higher-quality dates. Cameron Peña further explained that his newly issued driver's license opened some new doors and made dating smoother, but it did not necessarily transform what he could do because most bars accepted foreign passports. Josue Contreras-Ruiz spoke about having "more freedom" and feeling comfortable driving his girlfriend over 50 miles to visit her family: "Before, I wouldn't drive that much because I didn't have a license. The less you drive, the less you are likely to get pulled over." Francisco Garza reflected on how his sex life suffered before DACA because he worked as a manager at a pizza place where he was on his feet, rushing against the clock to fill orders:

I would just be working, working. [I'd] just want to go home and pass out and knock out. And even when I was with my girlfriend in college, there was times when she wanted to have sex and I'm too tired. . . . [I'd go to clubs and] my friend would say, "Those are two hot girls. Let's go talk to them." So I'd be like, "All right, let's go." I wasn't so excited about going. . . . My legs were hurting, I didn't shower. I was like, Ugh.

Obtaining a work permit through DACA allowed him to start an office job that left him with more energy: “I have more time. I’m not stressed. . . . I have more energy. I perform pretty good [sexually].” In all these examples, DACA made dating easier but did not transform relationship trajectories because these men had already established ways to negotiate illegality.

In some cases, DACA’s impact on relationships was minimal because economic benefits did not materialize. A few of the men who received DACA experienced only small changes to their employment opportunities and so still faced financial barriers. In other cases, newfound employment opportunities simultaneously translated into new responsibilities and commitments that could detract from relationship building. Before DACA, Zen Cruz had started a fledgling computer repair and web design business, and with it he accepted part-time office employment making \$1,800 a month. He explained how DACA shifted his dating: “I kinda put that in the background. So I’m more interested in trying to make the best of it . . . trying to use my work permit, work as much as possible, save as much as possible, and try not to get into too much debt.” In these cases, undocumented young adults struggled to balance pursuing newly available education and employment opportunities with their romantic relationships.

No women reported that receiving DACA transformed their relationship trajectories or dating participation, likely because their dependent gendered roles often insulated them from facing related barriers. They largely categorized DACA’s impact as making dating easier. Sarai Bedolla remarked that having a driver’s license reduced the risk of stigmatization: “You don’t have to pull out your one-foot [long] passport out of your pocket. . . . You realize how much easier it makes your life.” These changes were emotionally significant because they felt more normal and did not have to think about their immigration status when going out; they did not, however, have material consequences for women’s ability to date or advance relationships.

Notably, many of the men who had already established committed relationships or married found that DACA’s changes came too late. Immigration status barriers had already shaped their relationship experiences and choices. DACA only had the power to prevent damage before it occurred. Timing was key.

## CONCLUSION

Undocumented young adults’ dating experiences mirror those of their low-income, racial-minority peers who also face material constraints. Their immigration status, however, uniquely governs the production of these barriers and ensures that economic mobility is not forthcoming without legal intervention. Most can manage these barriers and establish romantic relationships. Still, illegality and hegemonic gendered expectations collide, turning material constraints

into socioemotional barriers by making them feel undesirable and forcing them to alter their dating activities and relationship decisions to match their material realities. This has fewer lasting consequences for undocumented women than men, as these barriers align with gendered expectations. Barriers accumulate for undocumented men as they make concessions to meet, reimagine, or renegotiate such expectations. In many cases, enduring consequences emerge over time as men experienced repeated rejection, delayed marriage, or were haunted by their inability to perform provider roles.

I shed new light on marginalized men's family formation process by showing that men can potentially manage their economic constraints by renegotiating gendered expectations with their partners. Indeed, committed citizen partners helped mediate barriers and adjusted their expectations accordingly. These relationships, however, remain on rocky ground, since renegotiating gender ideology is a difficult and ongoing task for both partners. These early experiences alerted couples to the potential struggles they will face if they commit to building a family together—economic instability, spatial immobility, and complicated power dynamics. I turn to these negotiations in the next chapter.