

The bordering of care: How exclusions from family support programs impact undocumented mothers and their young children in Canada

CATHERINE SCHMIDT 

York University, Canada

Abstract

Many parents in Canada rely on public family support programs during the early childhood period, including parental leave benefits, childcare subsidies, and the Canada Child Benefit. Parents who are undocumented, however, cannot access these social programs. Drawing on a policy review and interviews with undocumented mothers and service providers, this paper explores the impacts of welfare-state bordering - the legal and administrative barriers that prevent undocumented mothers from accessing family support programs. Participant experiences reveal how bordering contributes to family poverty and material hardship, and children's exclusion from early childhood education opportunities. Welfare-state bordering makes mothers dependent on others for their family's material survival, heightening mothers' risk of exposure to gender-based violence and exploitation. Undocumented mothers' experiences are analyzed through a feminist social reproduction lens to show how both their reproductive and productive labour is discounted within the current policy context. Findings highlight the need for policy changes to expand access

Corresponding author:

Catherine Schmidt, School of Social Work, York University, S880 Ross Building, 4700 Keele Street, Toronto, ON M3J 1P3, Canada.
Email: cjschmid@yorku.ca

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to the Canada Child Benefit and childcare subsidies to uphold the human rights of undocumented mothers and their children.

Keywords

bordering, Canada child benefit, social reproduction, undocumented migrants, welfare-state

Introduction

During the early years of parenting, families in Canada often experience increased dependence on welfare-state programs – including parental leave benefits, childcare subsidies and family income support programs – as parents negotiate the demands of caring for their child(ren) while maintaining their family's financial subsistence. Parents who have undocumented legal status, however, are unable to access most social programs (Bernhard et al., 2023). Based on empirical research combining a policy review with interviews with undocumented mothers and service providers, this paper brings together theories of migrant illegalization, bordering and social reproduction to explore the gendered effects of exclusions from family support programs for undocumented mothers caring for young children in Toronto, Canada.

Research has highlighted the challenges faced by undocumented migrants in Canada, including poverty, unsafe working conditions, limited legal protections, pervasive stress due to the threat of deportation, and limited access to social programs and healthcare (Berinstein et al., 2006; Gagnon et al., 2021; Magalhaes et al., 2010). Yet the experiences of undocumented mothers and parents remain understudied within the Canadian context, and immigration status is often invisible within policy debate and public discourse about family support programs. As a liberal welfare-state with significant public investment in family support programs, Canada presents an important context within which to study the consequences of exclusions from these programs.

Literature review and background**Undocumented migrants and access to services in the Canadian context**

Canada is a settler colonial nation that relies on immigration for population and economic growth. Over the past 20 years, Canadian immigration policy has shifted to prioritize temporary migration to fill labour market needs; in

2025, over 3 million precarious status migrants made up 7.3% of the total Canadian population (Statistics Canada, 2025). During this time, there has generally been strong public and political support for economic immigration, coupled with periods of anti-immigrant rhetoric and policy targeting refugees. The federal Conservative government under Stephen Harper (2006 to 2015) openly promoted anti-refugee discourse and changed policies to increase border controls, deter humanitarian migration, increase temporary migration, and limit pathways to permanent residence (Atak et al., 2018; Carver, 2016). While the Liberal Party was elected in 2015 on a pro-immigration platform, their policies have continued to prioritize temporary immigration and enable the exploitation of migrant labour.

Temporary migration programs without pathways to permanent residence have contributed to growing numbers of people residing in Canada without legal status. It's estimated that close to 500 000 undocumented people live in Canada, with 50% located in the city of Toronto, although there are no accurate population numbers (Duncombe, 2025; Magalhaes et al., 2010). Most migrants who become undocumented enter the country legally, on work, study or visitor permits, and then lose their legal status, through refugee application rejection, family sponsorship breakdown, expiry of visas, or dismissal from employment (Goldring et al., 2009). Despite years of research showing the rights abuses faced by undocumented migrants (Gagnon et al., 2021), these injustices have been ignored in policy making by federal and provincial governments. In 2021, this appeared to be changing when the federal Liberal government announced plans for a regularization program; however, these plans were abandoned in 2024 as public support for immigration decreased in response to growing unaffordability and right-wing efforts to scapegoat migrants for the rising cost of housing.

Municipal governments have been more responsive in attempting to protect undocumented residents. In 2013, the city of Toronto adopted a Sanctuary City policy, called Access T.O., committing to make municipal services accessible to all Toronto residents, regardless of immigration status (De Shalit et al., 2015). Despite this progress in recognizing undocumented residents' rights to services, studies show that the municipal policy has not been fully implemented and barriers to access remain (Hudson et al., 2016), including continued information sharing between Toronto Police and immigration authorities (Hershkowitz et al., 2021). Moreover, the policy applies only to municipally funded services, which include public libraries, emergency shelters and city recreation centres. It has no impact on key social programs provided by the provincial and federal governments. Provincial governments have authority over education, healthcare and social assistance, while the federal government oversees unemployment insurance including parental leave benefits, and income security benefits built into the tax system, like the Canada Child Benefit. Access to social programs for undocumented residents in

Toronto is therefore shaped by the interplay of federal, provincial, and municipal policies, and their implementation on the ground.

Canadian research suggests that immigrant families are particularly vulnerable to the stresses of the early childhood period, due to the challenges of settlement, financial stress, limited social networks, and a lack of affordable childcare (Bhuyan and Schmidt, 2018). Exclusions from employment protections and social programs intensify these difficulties for migrants with precarious status (Larios, 2023), and these exclusions are most acute for undocumented parents. Research shows that undocumented pregnant women often receive inadequate perinatal care in Canada due to the high costs of care and fears about being reported to immigration (Rousseau et al., 2014). The few Canadian studies about the experiences of undocumented parents highlight poverty, exclusion from services, and social isolation as major challenges, and show how parental immigration status limits children's access to services, even for citizen children (Bernhard et al., 2007; Foster, 2022; Hanley et al., 2020; Saad, 2013).

Current Canadian family support policies include employment standards offering job-protected parental leave for 12 to 18 months; paid parental leave benefits during this leave for those who qualify; the Canada Child Benefit (CCB), a cash transfer program for parents; and a 'work-in-progress' system of publicly funded formal centre-based childcare, with subsidies for low-income families. The current study aimed to understand the processes through which undocumented parents are excluded from these programs, and how these exclusions shape their conditions of parenting, using a critical feminist lens, drawing on theories of migrant illegalization, bordering and feminist social reproduction.

Understanding the experiences of undocumented mothers through the lens of bordering and social reproduction

Theories of migrant illegalization highlight how undocumented status is a socio-political condition, produced by state policies and legitimized through social and legal processes that construct some groups of immigrants as 'illegal,' and less deserving of rights (De Genova, 2002; Menjívar and Kanstroom, 2014). Within countries of the global North, like Canada, migrant illegalization is a racialized and class-based process; it primarily impacts non-wealthy migrants from formerly colonized countries of the global South in Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, and Asia, who are restricted from legal pathways to permanent migration (Villegas and Villegas, 2019). Critical bordering theories explore how the external border is reproduced within the lives of illegalized migrants, through everyday interactions with both state and non-state actors who differentiate and/or exclude

migrants based on their perceived right to belong (Parker and Vaughan-Williams, 2012; Yuval-Davis et al., 2019). Through determining who has the right to enter, remain and work in a nation state, and through shaping people's access to civil, political and social rights once inside, bordering constructs social and political order within neoliberal society and entrenches existing racial, colonial, gendered and class-based hierarchies (Yuval-Davis et al., 2019).

I draw particularly on the emerging concept of welfare-state bordering to examine how social policies participate in processes of migrant illegalization, through bordering practices which prevent precarious status residents from accessing publicly funded social programs (Bendixsen and Näre, 2024; Guentner et al., 2016; Könönen, 2018; Misje, 2020). Welfare-state bordering refers to the practices through which access to social rights are managed, controlled, and denied based on immigration status (Bendixsen and Näre, 2024). Such bordering takes place both through social policies explicitly excluding residents from social programs based on immigration status, and through institutional or frontline worker practices of exclusion (Bendixsen and Näre, 2024). These exclusions are often justified through shifting conceptions of 'deservingness' and discourses which construct migrants as non-contributing outsiders who are not entitled welfare-state benefits (Bendixsen and Näre, 2024; Guentner et al., 2016). Such exclusions have profound effects on the lives and well-being of migrants, often resulting in the denial of basic human rights to social welfare, including food, education, housing, health and workplace rights.

To conceptualize how such bordering shapes the conditions of parenting for undocumented mothers caring for young children in Toronto, I draw on a feminist social reproduction framework. Feminist social reproduction theories highlight the biological and care labour needed to reproduce and sustain human beings that is essential to capitalist economies yet is often devalued and invisible within political economic analysis (Bezanson and Luxton, 2006; Braedley and Luxton, 2015). A social reproduction framework draws attention to how the conditions of reproductive labour within families are shaped by state policies, and neoliberal processes of global economic restructuring which often download labour onto women, particularly poor and racialized women (Strauss and Meehan, 2015). Incorporating intersectional insights, a social reproduction framework highlights how hierarchies of race, class and gender embedded within globalized capitalism shape conditions of care work and access to care (Braedley and Luxton, 2015; Ferguson, 2016).

Social reproduction is at the heart of both push and pull factors which compel migrant women to leave their countries of origin (Katz, 2001; Kofman and Raghuram, 2015). Countries of the North rely on migrant women to fill in the gaps in social reproductive labour, with employment opportunities in both 'low-skilled' areas of care, cleaning and service work,

and 'high-skilled' areas of education and health (Kofman and Raghuram, 2015). The inability to meet social reproductive needs is often the motivation to migrate, yet migrants encounter a new set of social reproductive challenge in receiving countries, due to marginalization within the labour market, and exclusions from welfare-state programs (Kilkey et al., 2018; Kofman and Raghuram, 2015). A transnational social reproduction lens exposes how wealthy countries benefit from the transnational division of responsibility for social reproduction (Arat-Koç, 2006; Ferguson and McNally, 2015). Capitalist forces of displacement combined with restrictive immigration controls of richer countries produce a consistent supply of migrant labourers with precarious legal status who are excluded from the welfare state and are often unable to bring their families with them (Arat-Koç, 2006; Ferguson and McNally, 2015). Receiving states therefore profit from the labour power of these workers without having to take on full responsibility for their social reproduction needs (Ferguson and McNally, 2015).

International research about undocumented mothers shows how immigration laws and social policies create gendered processes of marginalization, affecting women differently because of their primary caregiving roles, and the invisibility of their social reproductive work (Abrego and Menjívar, 2011; Caballe-Climent, 2018; Luibhéid et al., 2017). Research from the United States shows how specific local policies and contexts create stark differences in the conditions of parenting life, with access to services differing greatly across different states and city contexts (Abrego and Schmalzbauer, 2018). In the UK, migrant families encounter 'hostile environment' policies across multiple sites when they try to access education, housing and welfare (Bencheikroun et al., 2024; Reynolds et al., 2024). These processes of exclusion have been less visible in Canada, where the undocumented migrant population is smaller and rarely acknowledged in public discourse, and there is little research about undocumented parents. This project aimed to make the gendered impacts of welfare-state bordering for undocumented mothers and their families more visible, and to contextualize these exclusions within the global inequalities which shape transnational flows of social reproduction.

Methods

The study used a critical feminist policy analysis approach combining a policy review and in-depth narrative interviews with undocumented mothers and service providers. Following feminist narrative policy scholars, personal stories were analyzed as a method of documenting the effects of public policies (Larios, 2023; Neysmith et al., 2005). This narrative methodological approach enabled a focus on undocumented mothers' everyday experiences of caregiving

as shared through their personal stories, while considering how these experiences are shaped by state immigration and social policies.

Policy review

The goal of the policy review was to understand the policy context of family support programs in Toronto, and the eligibility criteria which shape access to these programs for undocumented parents. The review focused on the federal, provincial and municipal policies that regulate key family support programs: parental leave benefits; childcare subsidies; and the Canada Child Benefit. In recognition of the changes to family support policies by the federal Liberal government starting in 2016, the review focused on documents from 2016 to 2023.

Interview data

Interviews were conducted with 12 service providers and advocates and 11 mothers. Service providers who had extensive experience working with undocumented parents were recruited through professional social work and migrant justice advocacy networks. Undocumented parents were recruited through community-based agencies, service providers, and online networks, with the aim of reaching parents who: 1) had recent experience as the primary caregiver for a young child (under age 6) while undocumented in the City of Toronto; and 2) could participate in an interview in English, French or Spanish (languages spoken by the principal investigator who conducted all of the interviews). Interviews took place between April 2022 and February 2023, following ethics approval from the Research Ethics Board at the University of Toronto. Interviews were conducted over Zoom or phone and lasted between one and two hours. Zoom and phone interviews were initially chosen because of the Covid-19 guidelines in place at the time the ethics protocol was submitted. Participants voiced their preference for this format as it made interviews more accessible for mothers who had limited childcare options – for example, some mothers were able to participate in the interviews from home while their children were napping. All participants provided informed consent, and interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent. Parent participants received a \$40 honorarium in recognition of their time and expertise. All data were carefully managed to ensure confidentiality. Pseudonyms are used to protect anonymity.

Data analysis

Interviews were transcribed and analyzed in their original language by the principal investigator, who is fluent in both languages. Select quotes from

the Spanish interviews were translated into English upon the decision to include them in the first draft of the manuscript. Transcripts were analyzed using a thematic narrative analysis approach focusing primarily 'on the 'told' – informants' reports of events and experiences, rather than on aspects of 'the telling'' (Riessman, 2008, 54). Efforts were made to keep individual stories told by participants intact for interpretive purposes rather than fragmenting the data (Riessman, 2008). Interviews were coded using NVivo software using both theoretical codes derived from the research questions and inductive codes. The policy review informed the interpretation of interview data, and the analysis of how policy is implemented and experienced on the ground.

Participant overview

Twelve service providers or advocates participated in interviews on Zoom. Participants included five social workers in community-based agencies; two family support workers; two migrant justice advocates; two community legal clinic lawyers; and one midwife. Most of the participants had been working with undocumented migrants for over 10 years, while three had less than five years of experience in this area. All participants identified as women.

Eleven mothers participated in interviews; nine took place over Zoom, and two by phone. Six interviews were conducted in Spanish and five in English. At the time of their interview, nine mothers were undocumented, and two had regularized their status. All parents identified as women. Four participants were from countries of the Caribbean and identified as Black Caribbean. Seven were from Spanish-speaking Latin American countries and identified as Latina. Participants ranged in age from 26 to 48 years old. Three participants were high school graduates; two had college diplomas; six had undergraduate university degrees. Participants had lived undocumented in Canada for an average of 6 years, ranging from just over 1 year to 15 years. Seven mothers were married or in a common-law relationship, and four mothers were single. Participants had between one and four children, with ages ranging from 10 months to 17 years old. The average family income was \$3235/month or \$38 832 CAN yearly. Monthly family incomes ranged from \$900/month to \$6500/month.

Findings and analysis

Mechanisms of welfare-state bordering and exclusion from family support programs

This section begins by examining the legal and bureaucratic processes through which undocumented parents are excluded from each of the family support

programs. I then explore the impacts of these exclusions for undocumented parents and their young children.

Legislative bordering of the Canada Child Benefit

The Canada Child Benefit (CCB) is a federal program providing a tax-free monthly cash transfer to low- and middle-income parents with children under age 18. Benefit rates are indexed to inflation; for 2024–25, families with incomes under \$36,502 received \$7787 per year for each child under 6, and \$6570 per year for each child between 7 and 17 years of age, and the benefit amount is slowly reduced as income increases (Canada Revenue Agency, 2025). This structure provides targeted support to low-income families while continuing to provide some financial benefit to most Canadian families. The CCB was introduced as a poverty reduction tool in 2016, and it has successfully helped to reduce child poverty and food insecurity across the country (Baker et al., 2021; Brown and Tarasuk, 2019). Yet due to eligibility restrictions, outlined in the federal Income Tax Act (RSC 1985, c.1, s122.6), children of undocumented parents are cut off from the benefit. Eligibility criteria explicitly exclude parents without a legal immigration status, even if their children are Canadian citizens. This is a form of *legislative bordering* – wherein the exclusion of groups based on immigration status is explicit within the legislation regulating eligibility for a social program.

Exclusion from the benefit functions as a form of differential inclusion and service providers described the inequities which the exclusion creates for low-income undocumented parents and their children, exacerbated during the post-pandemic affordability crisis. Undocumented mothers raise their children, often citizens themselves, in the same unaffordable context as other Toronto residents and contribute to the Canadian economy through their labour and as consumers, while being shut out from state social reproductive income support that helps other families to navigate the increasing costs of living. This exclusion increases their risk of severe poverty, particularly for single mothers, who must balance the logistical impossibility of caring for their children while meeting their financial needs for subsistence. For parents caring for children with disabilities, ineligibility for the CCB also creates barriers to getting economic supports targeted to families with children with disabilities.

Invisible labour and exclusion from parental leave benefits

Each province has provincial employment standards legislation mandating employers to offer job-protected *unpaid* parental leave. Many parents are eligible for paid benefits during this time through the federal Employment

Insurance (EI) program under the *Employment Insurance Act*, which covers all provinces, except for Quebec. Pregnant people can receive up to 17 weeks of maternity benefits, while any parent of a newborn can receive up to 61 weeks of parental benefits, allowing for 18 months of benefits. Standard benefits offer parents 55% of their pre-leave earnings up to \$695/week for one year; extended benefits offer the same monetary amount spread out over 18 months (Government of Canada, 2025). Eligibility for parental benefits is dependent on prior contributions to the EI program through at least 600 h of formal employment in the year prior to the leave. Feminist scholars have criticized the inclusion of parental benefits within the EI program because it ties eligibility to prior labour market participation, rather than recognizing parent's reproductive labour as inherently valuable and worthy of financial compensation (Doucet et al., 2020; Doucet and De Laat, 2022).

Undocumented parents cannot access parental leave benefits, even if they meet the eligibility criteria for 600 h of work. While the *Employment Insurance Act* does not mention immigration status directly, Section 138 states clearly that every person in insurable employment requires a Social Insurance Number (Employment Insurance Act, S.C. 1996, c. 23, s. 138). Undocumented residents are ineligible for parental leave benefits (and other EI benefits) because they do not have a valid SIN number and work outside of the formal labour market in uninsured work. Most mothers interviewed had worked in Canada for many more than 600 h before giving birth, yet none of them were eligible for parental leave benefits. Exclusion from these benefits contributed to their financial precarity in their child's early years and was particularly difficult for single mothers.

Bureaucratic bordering of childcare and childcare subsidies

Canada is currently implementing the Canada Wide Early learning Child Care program (CWELCC), a new national childcare program aiming to provide \$10/day center-based childcare across the country. Prior to the CWELCC, there was no national childcare program, and childcare services were primarily paid for by parent fees, resulting in high rates that were unaffordable for most low- and middle-income families. For example, in 2019, the median monthly rates in Toronto were \$1774 for infants and \$1457 for toddlers (Macdonald and Friendly, 2020). To make childcare more accessible, the province of Ontario funds childcare fee subsidies which are managed by municipalities, and eligibility is based on family income, as regulated under the Child Care and Early Years Act (CCEYA), 2014. Although the CCEYA does not mention immigration status in the eligibility criteria for subsidies, Regulation 138/15 specifies that parents must provide either a recent

Notice of Assessment (NOA) or Canada Child Tax Benefit Notice to prove their income eligibility (CCEYA, 2014). These documents can only be attained through filing one's income tax, and this is impossible for most undocumented residents. Thus, although there is no legal exclusion, in practice, the bureaucratic requirements to prove financial eligibility make it impossible for most undocumented parents to access fee subsidies and none of the mothers interviewed in the project had been able to access a childcare subsidy. This is a form of *bureaucratic bordering*, where inclusion is legally possible but made unattainable due to administrative practices.

The impacts of welfare-state bordering for parental and family well-being

The three processes of bordering described above converge to shape undocumented mothers' access to state social reproductive support, constraining the resources available to undocumented parents. Through legislative bordering, parents are excluded from the CCB and paid parental leave benefits, the primary income support programs that help families to navigate the tension between the intensive care needs of young children and labour market participation. At the same time, bureaucratic bordering processes stop parents from accessing childcare subsidies, making regulated childcare out of reach for many families. In this section, the cumulative impacts of such bordering for families are explored to show how they shape experiences of care within the home, creating material and psychological harms that intensify maternal care work, increase family stress, and deny children resources key to their development.

Logistical and financial stress related to child care and reliance on informal care

The inability to access childcare subsidies shapes the options that undocumented parents have for childcare, creating additional care work within the family. Mothers described a range of strategies to address their families' care needs. For partnered mothers, the high cost of childcare led most to decide to stay at home to care for their children during the preschool years. While full-time caregiving had benefits for some mothers, many described the stresses of the gendered division of labour, and the financial difficulty of living on one income. Many mothers did part-time cleaning work to make additional income when their partners were home from work. Some parents also relied on older children to provide childcare for their younger siblings.

A few mothers chose to enroll their children in regulated childcare. However, the high costs of care made it difficult to maintain a stable childcare spot, leading to multiple daycare transitions that were stressful for both parents and children. Some mothers relied on unregulated care, paying home daycare providers, relying on family or friend support, or exchanging childcare. Service providers described how families' needs for childcare often lead to creative arrangements and highlight community resourcefulness. However, informal childcare arrangements can also be precarious, creating stress when they break down. If parents are unable to work, this can mean losing a day's pay, potentially compromising their ability to pay rent, or buy food for the week. Childcare instability can also be difficult for children, as they lack the regularity which a consistent caregiver and routine can provide. In worst case scenarios, parents may be forced to rely on informal care that is unsafe and a potential risk for children.

Participant experiences reveal how exclusion from subsidies narrow the options available to undocumented parents in meeting their children's care needs. Welfare-state bordering amplifies reproductive labour and family stress, contributes to family's economic precarity and prevents children from accessing early childhood education and its positive impacts on development and school readiness. This inequity is of particular concern for children with disabilities who miss out on the opportunity for early intervention.

Poverty and material hardship

Undocumented parents are already at high risk of poverty, often working in low-wage jobs without protections or benefits and facing high rates of exploitation (Gagnon et al., 2021). Welfare-state bordering works in tandem with labour-market marginalization to exacerbate financial precarity for families. While their children are in their early years, mothers are shut out from childcare fee subsidies and limited in their employment options. At the same time, they are unable to access the income support of the CCB that other low-income families rely on to help them meet the costs of housing, food and other basic needs of their family.

Many mother participants described periods of difficulty meeting their family's basic needs, and different strategies for survival, including relying on food and clothing banks, stretching supplies, and sharing housing with friends and family. Financial precarity also limited the options parents had for providing recreational activities for their children. Two mothers described extended periods of housing insecurity.

For example, Mariana, a mother of one, had to stop working a few months into her pregnancy because of health complications. With no access to parental leave benefits to replace her lost income, she and her husband experienced deep financial challenges. Shortly after her son's birth, they were suddenly evicted

from the 1-bedroom apartment they shared with their in-laws. Unable to find an affordable apartment, they moved into a room in a friend's apartment where several other adults were living. The apartment was crowded and noisy and infested with bedbugs. These conditions contributed to Mariana's experience of postpartum depression and anxiety. As she described it:

It was terrible. It was terrible. And on top of that, I wasn't sleeping. I mean I wasn't sleeping because we were living with the guys who had opened their doors for us, because they had music, because they had parties, or because of the bedbugs. I wanted to sleep, and the baby would wake up, and my husband was working all day, and so I cried a lot, I cried and got depressed, I had postpartum depression. [translated from Spanish] (Interview with Mariana, mother of one)

Conditions of poverty were deepest and most difficult to exit for single mothers. River, a mother of three, described a deepening spiral of financial challenges over the 8 years since the birth of her first child. At the time of our interview, her main source of income was a small monthly amount paid by her children's father, a Canadian citizen who lived apart from the family. This income was less than the CCB benefit amount that River would have been entitled to if she were a citizen. River felt pressured to continue a sexual relationship with her children's father to maintain his financial support. They had no formal child support agreement. Although undocumented residents have the right to go through the family court process to set up child support, River feared being exposed to immigration authorities. Most of the money went to pay rent for the apartment River and her children shared with a friend. River described the impacts of poverty:

For food, there's nothing of food. I have food insecurity ever since I give birth to them. I don't have much income coming in, I'm not working so I only depend on the monthly of the father, so that's basically how my life is right now [...] But there's nothing that I can do about it at this moment, because I'm undocumented. So, I have to find ways and go to food banks to be able to provide for my family. [...] And you know, sometimes you look at your kids, and you just cry because they ask for stuff, and you know you cannot supply them. So it's very overwhelming. (Interview with River, mother of three)

Unable to afford childcare, River was limited to finding work during school hours, with few options. Recent health difficulties, likely connected to food insecurity, had made her previous informal childcare work impossible, deepening her poverty. River described the daily work required to meet her family's basic needs – visiting several food banks each week, searching for free resources, and strategizing to make food last, all forms of time consuming

and invisible reproductive labour necessary for family survival in conditions of poverty.

Conditions of dependence and exposure to exploitation and gender-based violence

As River's experience illustrates, the convergence of exclusions from family support programs contributes to intense financial dependence for undocumented mothers during their children's early years. This dependence increases vulnerability to exploitation and abuse. It also makes it much more challenging for mothers to leave abusive relationships, a reality highlighted by the experience of another mother participant, Beverly. After her daughter's birth, Beverly's partner, who had legal status, became increasingly emotionally and physically abusive and controlling. Beverly described how her financial dependence on her partner made leaving the relationship very difficult:

And all I kept thinking to myself was that I had to find a way out of this, for my daughter of course. I didn't want her to experience any of that, whether she's seeing it or hearing it or become a participant in that abuse. But it was also where, it was a double-edged sword, because that person was the person I was relying on to have support also. I didn't have... it's not like I could be like 'Oh, I can get up and get a job.' I wasn't able to do any of those things. So it was like now, what am I going to do, how am I going to get any sort of assistance? (Interview with Beverly, mother of one)

When the physical abuse escalated and police became involved, Beverly finally left the relationship, relying on a relative for a place to stay. When this housing situation broke down, Beverly found herself homeless with her infant daughter, relying on friends and acquaintances for a place to sleep. She described how this opened her up to other forms of exploitation, with one temporary housing situation breaking down because she refused her host's sexual advances, and another ending because she was pressured to engage in sex work. Beverly and her daughter eventually found stable housing due to the generosity of an acquaintance, but her reliance on others for survival during this time exposed her to danger. Beverly described this heightened vulnerability to exploitation and violence created by conditions of dependency:

It's a lot of physical danger, having to depend on people, because you can't trust the system to assist you because you potentially can get exposed, and so... you rely a lot on the people who you encounter who will be like 'Ok, we'll help you do this, we'll help you do that.' And you become, in a lot of ways,

exploited... which happened a lot to me, actually. You become super exploited.
(Interview with Beverly, mother of one)

As Beverly's experience illustrates, welfare-state bordering contributes to narrowing the options that single mothers have for financial survival during their children's early years. With no income support options, in leaving situations of intimate partner violence, mothers are made more vulnerable to other forms of gender-based violence and harm. Single mothers without income support become utterly dependent on the kindness of others to meet their material needs. Such intense dependence leaves mothers open to multiple forms of exploitation.

Undocumented mothers with young children who are single or leaving an abusive relationship are at severe risk of ending up unhoused. Service providers described how many mothers turn to shelters as a last resort when they have nowhere else to stay. In Toronto, women and family shelters are generally accessible to undocumented residents, although it can be difficult to find a spot. But for undocumented women staying in shelter, the inability to access childcare subsidies and income support makes leaving the shelter system very hard. Welfare-state bordering can thus create a situation of logistical paralysis as mothers become stuck, unable to access the income, housing and family supports that enable other mothers to move forward.

The experiences of single mothers clearly highlight the gendered impacts of welfare-state bordering, and how it disproportionately harms poor racialized mothers at the point where the reproductive labour needed to sustain their children's lives conflicts with their labour market participation. Mothers are made solely responsible for their children's survival while being shut out of social reproductive state programs designed to lessen caregiving parents' dependence on the labour market and mitigate some of the gendered inequities of reproduction.

Discussion and conclusion

The findings discussed above show how the bordering of family support programs leads to deepening financial precarity for undocumented mothers during their children's early years, when caregiving needs are highest and participating in paid work most difficult. Welfare-state bordering cuts mothers off from state-funded supports that help other families reconcile the care needs of young children and families' financial needs. Regardless of their work histories in Canada, when undocumented women become pregnant, they are unable to access parental leave benefits. Exclusion from childcare subsidies mean that families must make difficult choices about how to meet their children's care needs, mothers' employment options are limited, and family financial precarity increases. At the same time, families are shut out from

the income support of the CCB. This convergence of exclusions creates conditions of material and financial dependency, contributing to the heightened risk of exploitation and gender-based violence that deportability creates for undocumented women (Bhuyan et al., 2016; Pashang, 2011). These exclusions also have harmful consequences for children, who are impacted by family poverty, food and housing insecurity, increased parental stress, and potentially risky childcare situations. Children, regardless of their own legal status, face barriers to accessing center-based childcare, a finding that echoes previous studies showing that parental undocumented status impacts children's access to social programs, even for Canadian citizen children (Bernhard et al., 2007; Foster, 2022). Exclusions from family support programs create a range of harms that violate the human rights of undocumented mothers and their children, and contribute to racial and gendered inequality in Canada.

Considering undocumented mothers' experiences of welfare-state bordering through a transnational social reproduction lens highlights how both their productive and reproductive work is made invisible within the current policy context. Undocumented women perform paid work in the informal labour market, often in devalued feminized sectors, doing cleaning, service or care work (Hanley et al., 2020; Magalhaes et al., 2010). When undocumented women have babies, this paid labour goes unrecognized, and they are ineligible for EI parental leave benefits. The reproductive work of undocumented mothers is also unrecognized and is intensified by their exclusion from publicly funded programs. Welfare-state bordering cuts undocumented mothers off from state support, leaving them to privately deal with the care needs of their children, and exposing them to material hardship, financial dependence, and increased risk of exploitation and gender-based violence. The resulting intensification of their reproductive labour goes unseen. Yet in most cases, this labour will benefit the Canadian state in the future, when their citizen children grow up and enter the formal labour market.

Migration scholarship using a transnational social reproduction lens has interrogated Canadian immigration policies and the state's attempts to benefit from immigrant reproductive labour, while minimizing immigrant access to welfare state programs (Arat-Koç, 2006; Braedley et al., 2021). For example, Braedley et al. (2021), show how Canada's immigration policies prioritize the admission of young highly educated working age immigrants, allowing Canada to benefit from source country investments in social reproduction needed to birth, raise and educate these adults, while denying their older immigrant parents access to Canadian social programs. Other work has examined how Canada imports migrant labour to meet the country's social reproduction needs through its migrant caregiver programs, often requiring caregivers to endure long periods of separation from their own children (Arat-Koç, 2006; Cote-Boucher and Braedley, 2025). Arat-Koç (2006) points out that, as a settler colonial society that relies on immigration to meet labour market needs and to sustain the welfare state, Canada 'has

never been ‘self-sufficient’ in social reproduction’ (p. 91). A transnational social reproduction lens further highlights how Canada contributes to deteriorating conditions of social reproduction in low- and middle-income countries that push many migrants to leave their homes in the first place. This occurs through multiple practices, including upholding systems of global trade and militarization that benefit rich countries, the destructive extractive practices of Canadian mining companies, and Canada’s disproportionate contribution to the climate catastrophe (Walia, 2021).

Applying this lens to the experiences of undocumented mothers destabilizes commonly held conceptions of contributions and entitlements that underlie justifications of welfare-state bordering. When made visible, undocumented mothers’ experiences help to expose the fault lines within nationalist framings that construct undocumented migrants as non-contributors, raising the question of what kinds of contributions count? And at what point do we start counting contributions? Undocumented mothers’ experiences illustrate the ambiguities involved in assessing right to membership in the welfare-state in the context of globalized capitalism that creates the need for migration and highlight the injustices that the state perpetuates through withholding social reproductive support from migrant families. The same political economy of neoliberal globalization underlies both the use of bordering to control labour markets and the shrinking of public resources used to justify the need for welfare-state bordering (Yuval-Davis et al., 2019). The Canadian state controls flows of migration, produces precarious and undocumented immigration status through policies that limit access to permanent residence, and benefits from migrant labour. It therefore has a responsibility to develop social policies that protect the human rights of all people within its borders. Within this context, social policy oriented towards social justice must resist welfare-state bordering practices that harm the most marginalized residents and entrench racial, gendered, and class inequities.

For undocumented mothers and their children specifically, two relatively simple policy changes could reduce the harms created by legislative and bureaucratic bordering. First, to ensure that all low-income families with children can access the Canada Child Benefit, parental immigration status should be removed from the eligibility criteria for the CCB. Secondly, to ensure that center-based childcare is accessible to all children residing in the country, regardless of parental immigration status, municipal childcare fee subsidy programs should allow parents to provide alternative evidence other than tax documents to demonstrate proof of income eligibility. More broadly, the most effective way for the Canadian state to take seriously its responsibility to protect undocumented migrant rights would be through a regularization program to enable undocumented residents to become permanent residents and citizens.

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ORCID iD

Catherine Schmidt  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3046-6082>

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Author biography

Catherine Schmidt is an assistant professor in the School of Social Work at York University in Toronto. She studies the intersections of immigration and social policies and how they shape access to social rights for migrants with precarious status in Canada. Her research is informed by over a decade of social work practice. ORCID ID: 0000-0003-3046-6082