

# American Dreaming:

The Roadmap  
to Resilience for  
Undocumented  
Storytellers



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Looking back at a decade of advocacy and the mental health impact to storytellers

# Table of Contents

- 5 Welcome
- 6 Key findings
- 8 Who was surveyed?
- 12 Findings:
- 13 Agency
- 20 Support
- 29 Inclusion
- 32 Legacy
- 36 Solidarity
- 40 Recommendations
- 42 Authors and Contributors
- 44 Methodology

# Introduction

This report is the culmination of two years of research with 40 storytellers from the immigrant rights movement who bravely shared their stories through the Obama, Trump, and Biden eras of U.S. history.

We acknowledge the strong history of immigrant rights movements in the U.S. and build on the foundation of those that came before us in our examination of the undocumented youth movement of the 21st century. The report is unconventional in format. Written in first person plural (i.e. “we”), it is a composite narrative that reflects salient themes from life history interviews with study participants. The group were undocumented or formerly undocumented Americans, between the ages of 25–40, who began sharing their stories publicly prior to the announcement of DACA. The research is based on a mixed method study, including: mental health surveys on seven measures, life history interviews, and a digital storytelling workshop.

A composite narrative is a qualitative research tool used to illustrate common themes of the research while allowing for a high degree of anonymity for public figures.<sup>1,2</sup>

Typically composite narratives use “I” to explore a single narrative; this report uses “we.” Undocumented and formerly undocumented immigrants and the children and loved ones of immigrants created the research and the report. In that spirit, we do not hold ourselves separate from the research.

The findings are intended as a map for well-being for all those who follow the path of bold storytelling in the immigrant rights movement. May we find resilience in ourselves and each other for the journey ahead.

*This work was made possible thanks to the generous support of the National Geographic Society.*

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1. Willis, R. (2019). The use of composite narratives to present interview findings. *Qualitative Research*, 19(4), 471–480. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794118787711>

2. Wertz, M. S., Nosek, M., McNiesh, S., & Marlow, E. (2011). The composite first person narrative: Texture, structure, and meaning in writing phenomenological descriptions. *International journal of qualitative studies on health and well-being*, 6(2), <https://doi.org/10.3402/qhw.v6i2.5882>

“It is such a force — like a thousand raging bulls just charging you. That is what it means to be undocumented.”

# Dear Reader,

I write to you in love and urgency. We must take care of our own, but we must also take care of ourselves. The modern immigrant rights movement was born in us when we realized that we were not alone, that there was power in community, and that our stories could set ourselves and our families free.

Over a decade later we are still in this fight. Every day, we face colossal pressures, both specific and existential, that threaten to destroy us. But, as my friend the poet Yosimar Reyes says, “I love us.” In this report, we provide a framework of insights from the field about how to center that love in ways that will heal us and bring stronger resilience for the journey ahead.

The findings of this report put numbers to what we already know. Many, if not most of us, suffer from high levels of post-traumatic stress disorder. We are also highly resilient. Why? Because when we’re at our best, we support each other fiercely.

Thinking of the roadmap for the next decade and beyond, I ask this: If you love the movement, shouldn’t the movement love you back?

We must take care, as individuals and as leaders in our respective organizations, to center people and their well-being above stories. Conversations and check-ins are essential to assessing the health of our storytellers. Just because we have shared our stories once,

does not mean that we volunteer our stories to be told on command eternally. We need to walk gently, listen intently, and not perpetuate cycles of retraumatization in ourselves or each other.

I am proud that the findings of this report are the original research of Define American, supported by the National Geographic Society and in collaboration with the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. It is a labor of love and our hope is that the report serves as a guiding light as we continue to endure and find resilience for the road ahead.

In solidarity,



Jose Antonio Vargas  
Founder, Define American

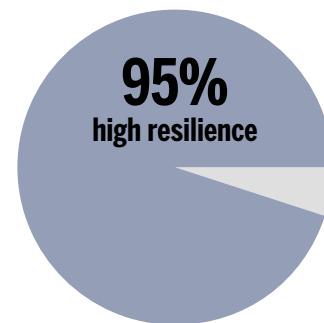
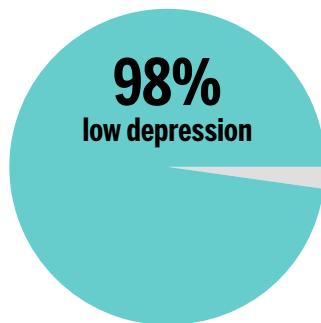
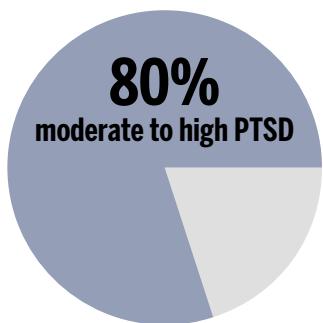
# Key Findings

The survey sample includes 40 undocumented or formerly undocumented participants, between the ages of 25–40, who shared their stories with a national audience.

The average survey respondent was a DACA recipient, age 30, who entered the U.S. at the age of eight.

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On average, the storytellers have ...



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As social support increases, resilience increases —

even after controlling  
for education, income,  
occupation, age,  
relationship status,  
and region.



## How do undocumented storytellers remain resilient?

Agency

**Our power is in us, not solely in our stories.**

Support

**We must support each other.**

Inclusion

**We are complex and will not sacrifice our complexity for a simple, generic story.**

Legacy

**Our legacy will be a lifetime of work, not a scorecard of hours.**

Solidarity

**We cannot endure without a culture of love and solidarity.**

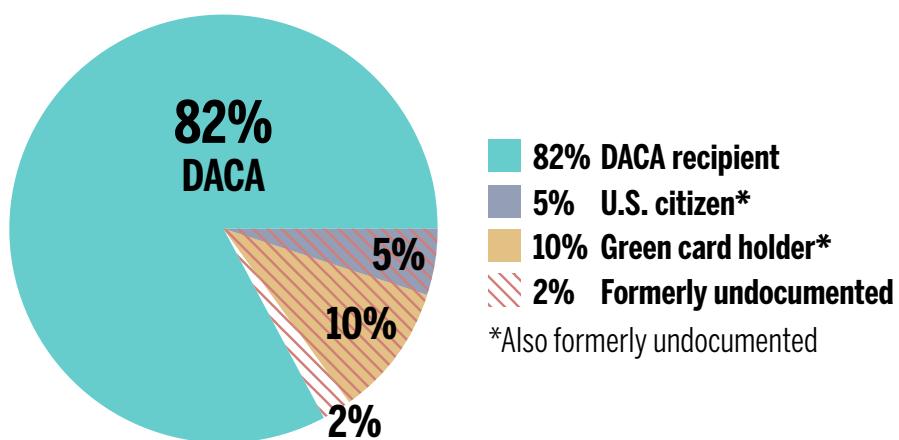
# Who was surveyed?

The survey sample includes 40 participants that meet the following eligibility criteria: 1) undocumented or formerly undocumented; 2) between the ages of 25–40; 3) shared their stories with a national or large regional news media outlet for advocacy purposes between 2010–2016, prior to Obama's executive order for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA).

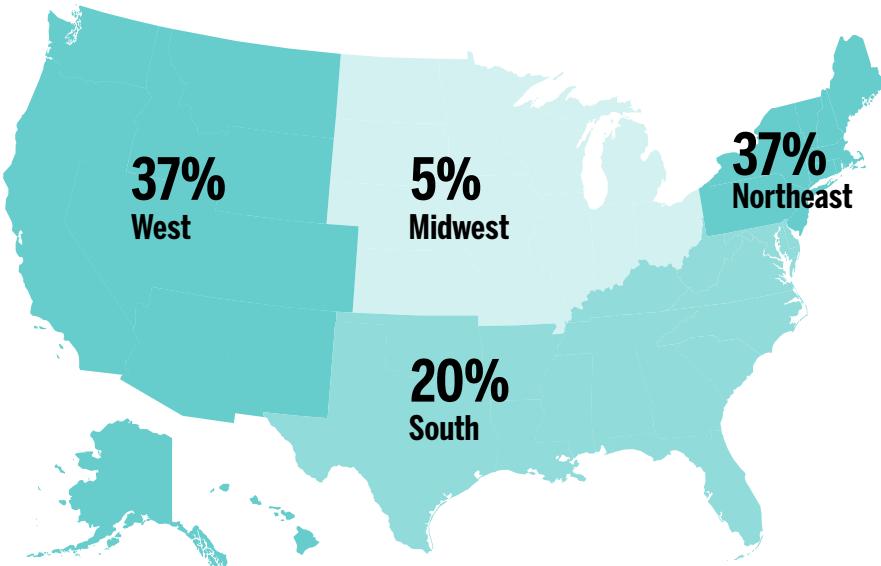
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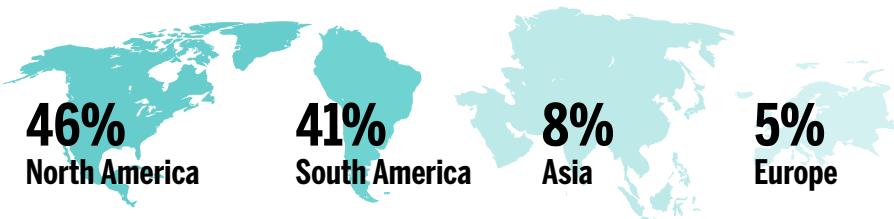
## Immigration Status



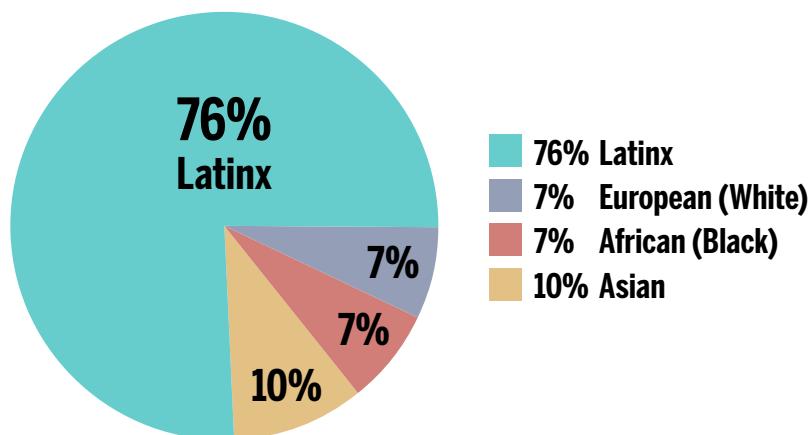
## Region



## Birthplace



## Ethnicity



“Whenever I was tired, whenever I was upset, whenever I felt defeated, I would keep going. Because I know that I carried the story of every single person I have ever met and who had ever shared their story with me. I carried that with me and I felt that if I didn’t keep going I would let them down.”



# Findings

Agency

# Our power is in us, not solely in our stories.

Sacrifice is something we know well because our families gave everything for us. We grew into adulthood with a deep understanding of all that our parents, aunts and uncles, and grandparents could have done, could have been, if they had been given the opportunity. Instead, they dedicated their lives in service to ours, sacrificed their own well-being and comfort to ensure we had lives filled with open doors.

Our families' selflessness gave us the power to dream.

We do the work of the movement for them, and we feel an unfathomable sense of guilt that our movement has, on some level, set us free while leaving them behind. We share their stories, we share our stories, even past the point of collapse because we know that they would do the same for us. A core value of selflessness unites us, regardless of where we were born.

We understood each other and transformed our fears into bold storytelling. Our fellow Americans saw the magnitude of what we created — so did politicians and

advocacy groups, who trumpeted our cause. The media amplified our stories. We gained agency and exposure.

We saw the enactment of DACA, and we understood the potency of our stories, especially when threaded together into a single narrative. Despite the fear that our families had around our movement, we believed we could liberate us all. But our story also got co-opted.

We learned that our stories were currency. Just as others used us for our stories, we educated ourselves on how to use storytelling. We found careers and financial security.

But the personal connection with our memories dulled from overuse. We looked to other experiences unrelated to our immigration stories to generate the performance needed for public storytelling.

**We knew emotion moved people but we grew numb to our own stories.**

After low periods marked by sadness, anger, and exhaustion, we rediscovered ourselves.

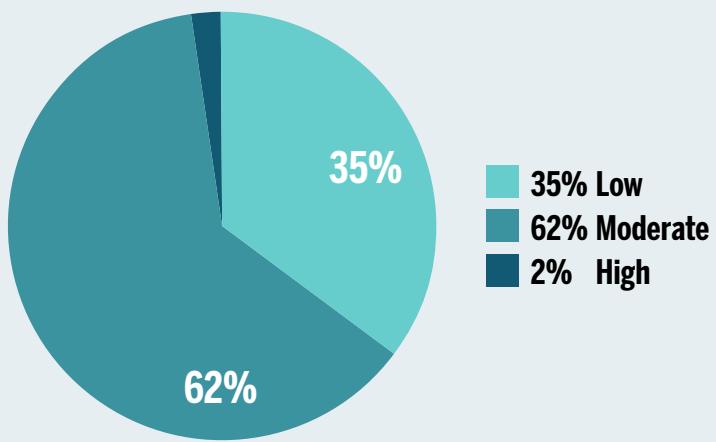
We invested in our own education. We cared for our families. We gave service within our local communities. By channeling our

loneliness, rage, and frustration into other kinds of storytelling we reconnected with ourselves — our *authentic* selves. We grew up, no longer the DREAMers but dreaming nonetheless.

**We learned that the power to move others to action was never solely in our stories; the power was in us. We set boundaries, pushed back, said no, and stepped away at times to protect ourselves.**

## Stress

In their daily lives, the storytellers felt moderate-to-low levels of stress. The questions investigated areas of their lives where they feel life is unpredictable, out of control, or generally overwhelmed. Many discussed high levels of stress associated with early life, particularly their teenage and college years, but that they have a higher degree of control over their lives, in large part due to DACA.



“I was resisting. I was telling them I didn’t want to do this. Everybody was looking at me. And you know what got me to do it? They told me, ‘You have to do this for the movement.’ ...And I felt so alone. I felt so disconnected.”

## *Retraumatization*

A preliminary finding in the data indicates that even for those who have often told their stories publicly re-sharing their stories during times of personal challenge might be detrimental to their well-being. We see a potential connection to elevated PTSD and stress.

### **When engaging storytellers:**

- Create a dialogue — a storyteller might not always be willing to share a story that they have told in the past.
- Respect boundaries — when storytellers are clear about the details they will and won't share, do not push for more.
- Center the person, not the story — if a storyteller is clearly struggling personally, offer ways to scale down the work or provide a way of stepping away from the project.
- Take time for developing new voices — storytellers who are new to sharing their stories publicly must have training and guidance to lay a foundation for good health and well-being for their storytelling career.

“The fact that I had become so involved in a fight, that I had given it my all, and that I had not prioritized my mental health, that was one of the reasons why I was feeling so bad, that I was feeling depressed, anxious, frustrated all the time, that I wasn’t able to focus in school. It wasn’t until those [therapy] sessions when I began to make sense of what was going on with me. And eventually I began coming out of that hole.”



Support

# We must support each other.

We were drawn to the movement over a decade ago to find others like us. We felt stronger together. But we didn't anticipate feeling collective pain together, too — disappointment, sorrow, and despair. That pain, both personal and unifying, motivated us as much as our triumphs. Our work healed us as much as it drained us, but we felt better doing the work together than suffering alone.

We did not go it alone. Even more than a decade later, when we gather together, we know with an audacious certainty that we can change the future of this country. We support each other.

When as individuals we feel picked apart, overextended, and undervalued, a loneliness and disconnectedness settles deep within us, and we struggle. High expectations of ourselves often lead us to depression, the exhaustion of giving too much of ourselves combined with the fear of letting others down. We have feelings of worthlessness when we deviate from the group or the movement's plan for us.

**The dark times were marked by exhaustion, burnout, desperation, physical sickness, harmful thoughts, and self-harm.**

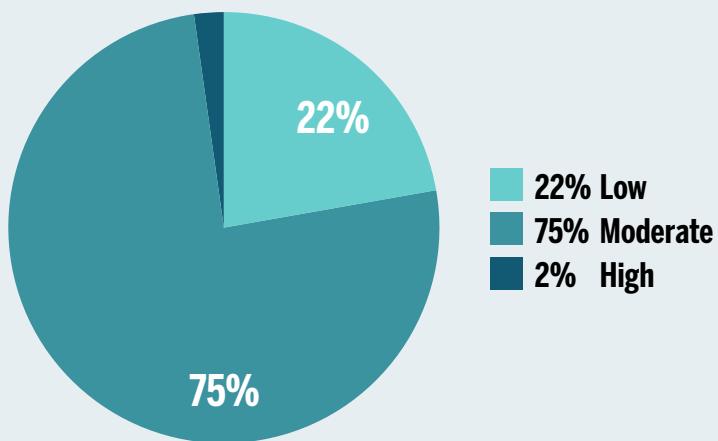
## **We are resilient but that resilience is not without cost.**

What brings us back home to ourselves are our families and friends. Our families often struggle to understand or acknowledge our mental health issues in part due to cultural legacies of stoicism, and as a movement we've only just started talking about mental health. We need an open discussion.

We need resources and plans for care. We must acknowledge that living undocumented causes a real and present burden to our mental health, and the work of activism can also take its toll.

## *Self-Confidence*

On average, the storytellers have healthy self-confidence, even those struggling with high severity PTSD, moderate stress, and/or moderate depression. Self-confidence, or self-esteem, refers to a person's belief in their own abilities and worth. Most storytellers described feeling a self-confidence boost after joining the immigrant rights movement, bolstered by newfound social support.



merican Dreaming -



“After that day it all changed because not only did I feel pain with people, but months later there was a huge network of undocumented youth across the country that were all moving in step together. And it just shows a kind of collective pain. Like what collective pain can do to people and force them to act, especially if you’re not just accountable to yourself but you’re also accountable to all of your peers that feel the same thing.”

In the meantime, our families and friends showed us gentleness and encouragement. The sting of guilt from neglecting our families to bolster the movement threatened to push us back into isolation. But they love us and forgive us, and we were able to move on.

An important way that we support each other is to show up for one another in the spaces in which we work. We, as storytellers, must believe in ourselves and support one another's own unique, nuanced stories. We must believe that our autonomy and agency will liberate us, and lift up ourselves and each other in the process.



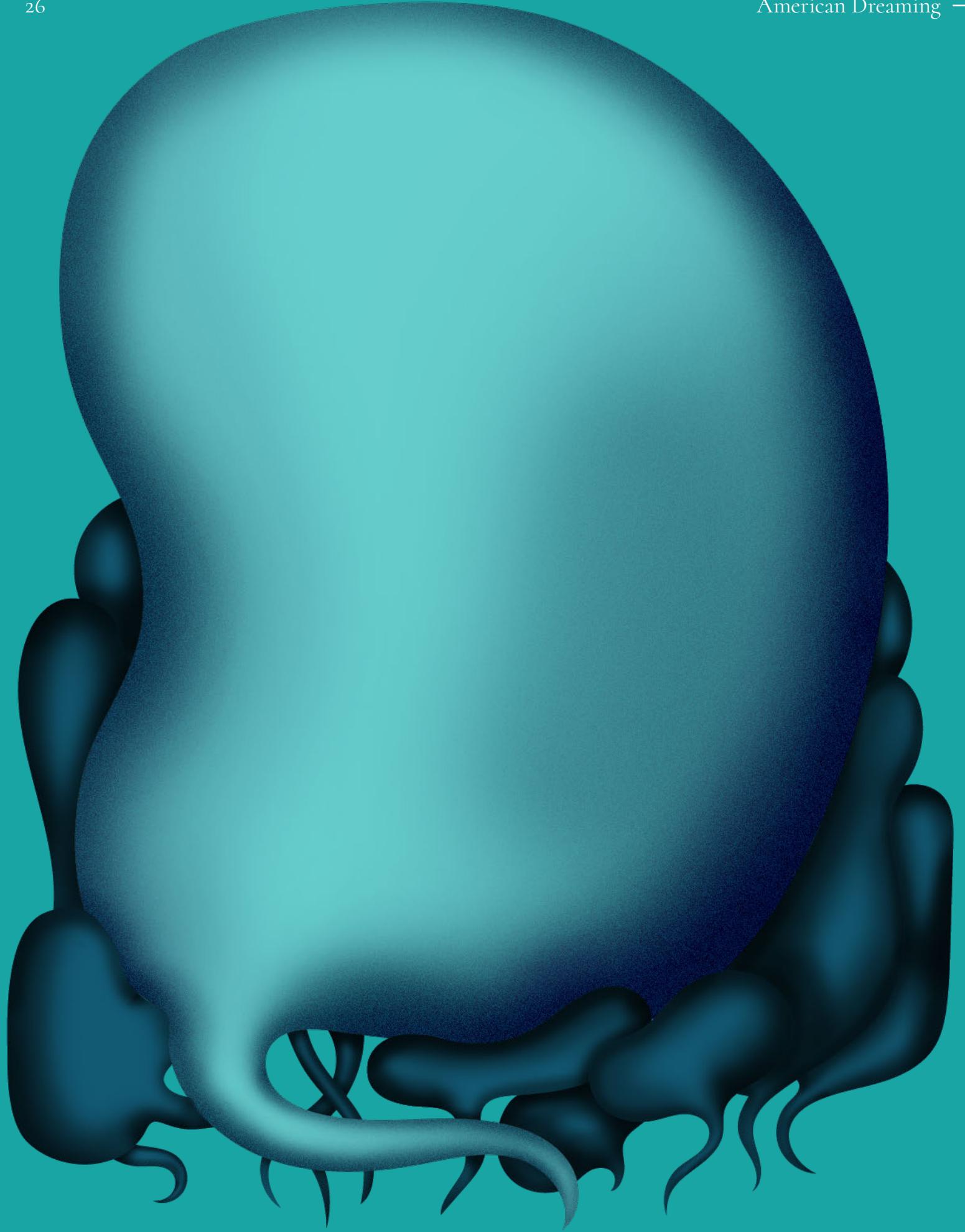
# *Even the smallest token of appreciation can alleviate heavy feelings.*

Ways that we can appreciate each other include:

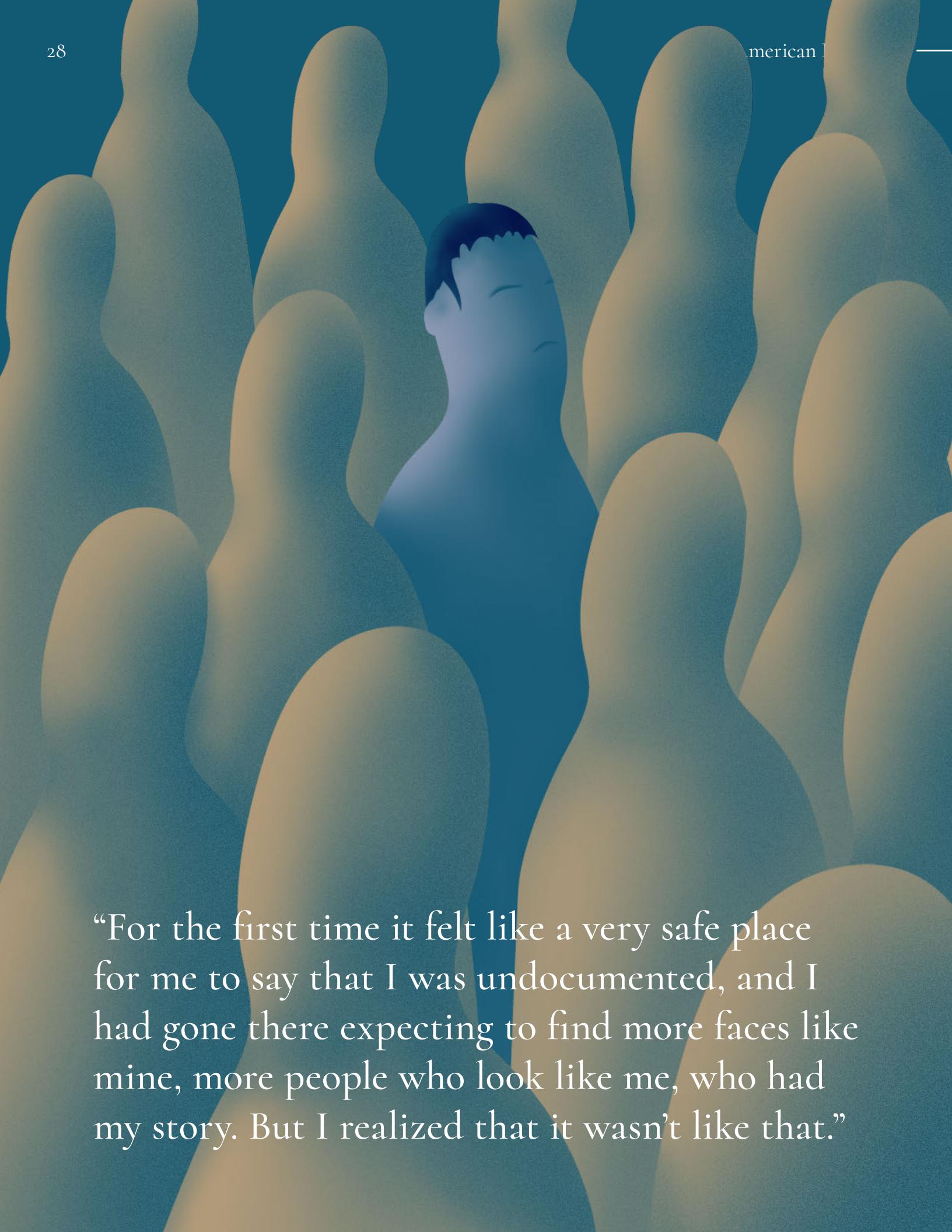
- Give grace and remember that each of us is flawed.
- Acknowledge when you might have stepped over boundaries.
- Apologize when you may have made a mistake or assumption; we are all human.
- Be diligent in valuing each other above the movement.
- Practice kindness without judgement; listen and empathize. Do not bear the weight of the world — or the movement — alone. It is not yours to carry by yourself.
- Embrace that we are all, at times, living a rollercoaster ride of experiences and emotions, and that's okay.

# *To show that you value us and our work, it is okay and necessary to ask:*

- How to pronounce and spell our names correctly.
- Our pronouns so you can represent us correctly.
- How we would like to be compensated for our contributions.
- How to include us in the decision making process around our stories.
- If we have the time, given an estimation of a project's commitment that you provide in advance.
- What we are and are not willing to share publicly at a given time.
- Respectfully, if we are comfortable with speaking on or giving voice to a broader undocumented or immigrant experience.
- Actively seek feedback about the process and experience.



“We were being selective about whose story we valued more than others at any given time, despite the fact that they’re all addressing the same issue, that they all touch on the same themes, that they all touch on the same concept, which is profound human suffering.”



“For the first time it felt like a very safe place for me to say that I was undocumented, and I had gone there expecting to find more faces like mine, more people who look like me, who had my story. But I realized that it wasn’t like that.”

Inclusion

# We are complex and will not sacrifice our complexity for a simple, generic story.

We are energized by our differences. And yet, the pressure to provide good public relations strategies and great political plans has often caused us to reduce our movement to the “best” stories. We gave power to others to determine which stories we raised up and which ones we left out. We limited our movement when, at our core, we stand for liberation for us all.

The aim of telling a simple, universal story trapped us and divided us. We alienated others and felt alienated ourselves. We understood that the strategies could be effective for short-term gain but did not account for what we would lose in the long term.

Some of us felt left behind. Some of us questioned if we ever really belonged.

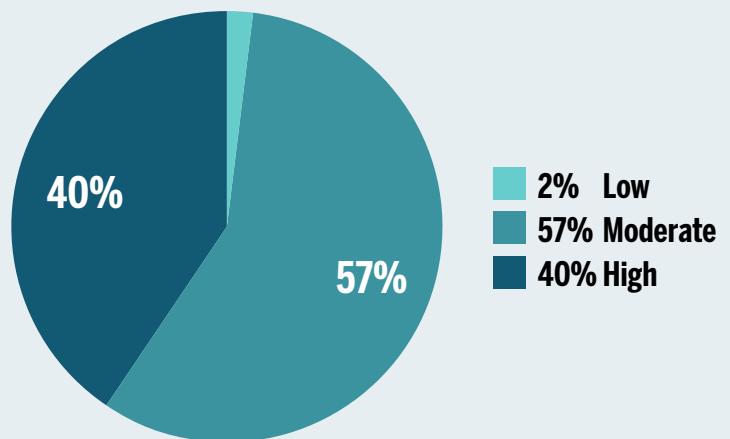
We also tokenized each other. The same people were called on time and time again around requests for an underrepresented story. Instead of feeling solidarity, loneliness set in.

We feared that our complexity would lose us ground in the fight. In truth, our strength is our differences.

We cannot silence any one of our stories, any one of our voices, for the sake of a good sound bite. We still struggle, though we are listening and recalibrating.

## *Need to Belong*

On average, the storytellers described a longing to belong to their schools, communities, states, the United States, and their birthplaces. Their need to belong — or need to gain control of their sense of belonging — is a driving force of their storytelling. Why do the storytellers persist with using their stories for public advocacy even during times of government targeting? From their point of view, shaping public opinion through their storytelling provides a path to belonging.



“When I started getting involved, a lot of it was that they used you for your story.... Come share your story. You’re a good storyteller. But when it was time to talk strategy or next steps, [they’d say] you can’t handle this. You’re too emotional. You don’t know what you’re doing. You’re not strategic.”

Legacy

# Our legacy will be a lifetime of work, not a scorecard of hours.

Many of us thought we would dedicate our lives to the movement for a few years, pass the DREAM act, and live happily documented ever after.

Together, we were undocumented, unapologetic, and unafraid. We were not alone.

Over a decade later, our lives have been molded around a movement that we now acknowledge might extend beyond our lifetime. In fact, many of us see that the struggle began before us and will likely continue for generations after us.

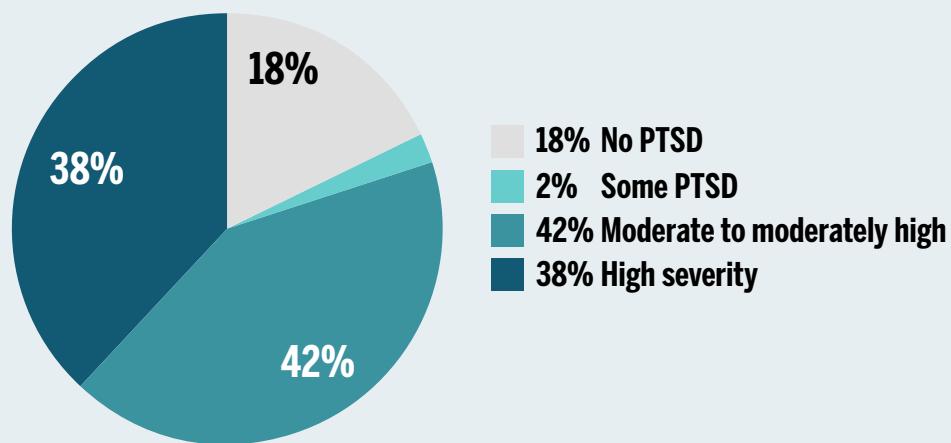
We are weary from years in the fight, and burnout grows in our bones, an exhausted realization that even an infinite set of hours might never be enough. Yet our movement — our

hope, our aspiration — centers on the notion that the big win might be just around the corner if we pull one more all-nighter, if we tell one more story, if we give one more interview, if we recruit one more person, or if we go on one more march.

**We cannot continue to sacrifice ourselves without end.**

## *Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)*

Most of the storytellers described childhood events touching on trauma in and around their families' immigration experiences. Common themes included: financial instability, housing insecurity, targeting/fear of targeting by the government and community members, domestic violence, neglect, substance use, and self-harm. PTSD is characterized by experiencing or witnessing a disturbing event or series of events that disrupts everyday life for an extensive period of time. The condition manifests in uncontrollable thoughts about the event(s), high anxiety, flashbacks, and nightmares. Most of the storytellers have moderate-to-high severity PTSD related to childhood trauma.



We do not want to face it, but we understand that we, as individuals, may not fully see the liberation of the undocumented community in our lifetime. We have faith that we will see big gains, but the next battle always lies ahead. Our work is colossal and we do not have to carry the movement alone.

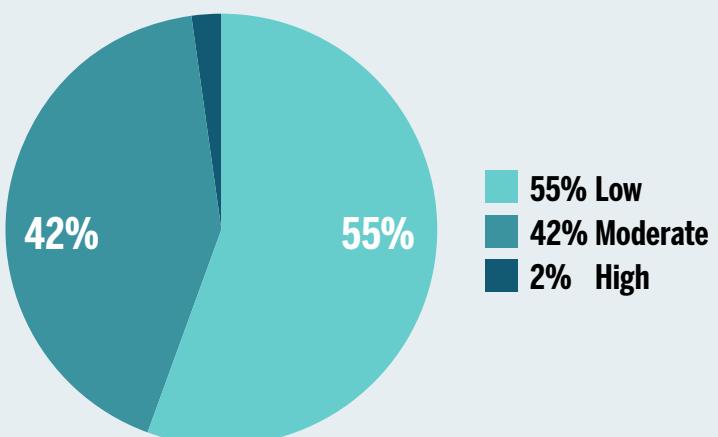
Our legacy is built by us and no one individual's contribution will make or break it. We see that the path forged by those in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s gives fortitude to those working for the Movement for Black Lives today.

**We can take care of ourselves, even if it means stepping away from the movement for a few months, a year, a decade, or even the rest of our lives.**

Creating space to foster our own individual dreams and ambitions is an act of bravery because daring to imagine a future life triggers deep fears for us. And, maintaining the energy for the movement is as exhausting as it is exhilarating. We now know — or we're trying to know — that prioritizing our well-being is essential to keeping our movement alive.

## Depression

A small group of participants reported being clinically diagnosed with depression. Most detailed low periods associated with extreme feelings of exhaustion, burnout, fear, anxiety, desperation, loneliness, physical sickness, harmful thoughts, and self-harm. Depression is a mood disorder that causes prolonged feelings of sadness that can affect the way a person thinks, feels, and acts. The survey asked storytellers to report current feelings associated with depression; the findings indicate moderate-to-low depression for most storytellers.



“My mom back then, being from a Latino culture, she didn’t really understand depression, so she would scold me and she would just say, ‘Stop it.’ I don’t think she was able to support me as much as our family needed to be supported.”

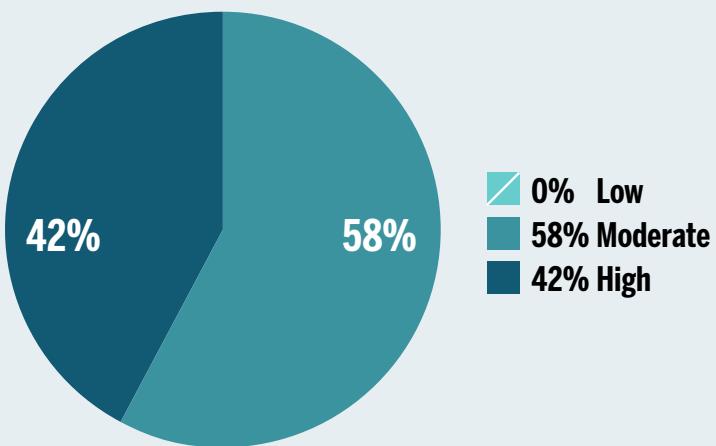
Solidarity

# We cannot endure without a culture of love and solidarity.

We created a family through our storytelling. That is what our movement was built on — a culture of love. We embraced each other as brothers and sisters regardless of where we were from. Our vision was more than the sum of our differences. Over the years, in large part due to the strain and pressure of the work, we have at times forgotten that we are on the same side.

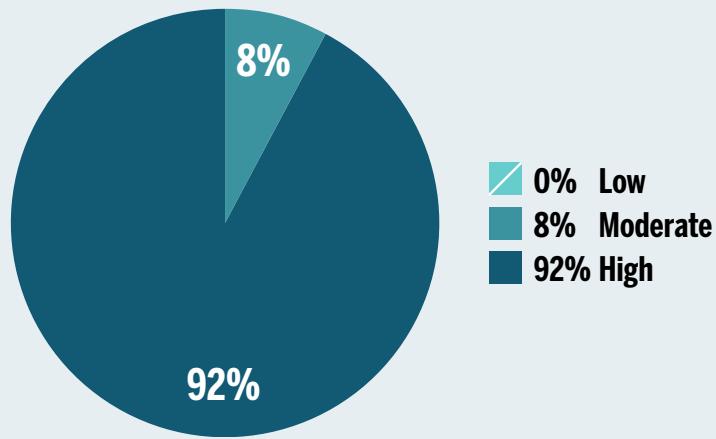
Our movement will not thrive if we seek out moments to tear each other apart.

## *Social Support*



What's the key to resilience for the next 10 years? Social support. The storytellers responded to questions around feeling supported by family, friends, and trusted people in their networks with positivity. In general, they feel they have the support that they need and the more support they have, the more resilient they are.

## Resilience



The majority of storytellers are highly resilient.

Resilience is defined as the ability to overcome great adversity and/or hardships.

For the storytellers, higher levels of social support were associated with higher levels of resilience; the more support they had, the more resilient they felt.

Holding grace for one another can be hard when we also believe in holding each other accountable. Sometimes we have gone too far in our diligence to accountability and have made judgments on each other's character instead of corrections on one another's actions.

We believe the movement is made up of good people. We love and value one another, and we make mistakes.

A culture of love and solidarity is needed to see us through the next decade. We have many wins ahead, but it will take all of us. That has guided us to a bold statement:

**If you love the movement, the movement should love you back.**

We will work to find kindness for one another and gentleness for ourselves. We will set boundaries and hold accountability with grace. We will practice deep inclusion. We will be vulnerable, and honor the vulnerability of those who are with us.

And we will be resilient.



“I still fundamentally believe that stories are good things. Stories are a powerful tool of change. And so, for me, in some ways it’ll be the most I can do to pay it back. To take all these stories that I’ve heard over the years, to take all these people, and to write them down in ways that they cannot ever be forgotten.”

# Recommendations

At Define American, we acknowledge our own missteps over the past ten years of our existence within the movement. The American Dreaming research findings act as a guide for us, too, to better inform how we work with storytellers.

As an outstretched hand of collaboration for a stronger movement, here is our pledge when working with storytellers:

**We will ask:** Is now a good time to share your story? How have you been since we last connected?

- We will offer ways to scale down the work or provide a way of stepping away from the project if necessary.

**We will ask:** What do you feel comfortable sharing now?

- We will use the answer as a guide for healthy boundaries in our collaborations and will not ask for additional details or efforts.

**We will ask:** Have you shared your/this story before?

- We will facilitate training and give guidance to lay a foundation for good health and well-being in the storytelling community.

**We will offer a scope of work, compensation, and a timeline for involvement, and ask if it feels in line with your expectations.**

**We will design ways of seeking feedback and suggestions for nurturing storytellers' mental health and well-being within our work.**

**We will hold others we work with, particularly in the media, accountable for honoring your contributions.**

- For pronouncing and spelling your names correctly
- For honoring your gender identity and pronouns
- For being forthcoming and transparent about when conversations are "on the record" or "off the record"
- For including you in the decision-making process around your stories
- When possible, sending you a draft of the story write-up before it publishes or being open to edits after a story has published if you, as the storyteller, feel uneasy about story details
- For following up with a link to a written/recorded story once it is published
- For simply thanking a storyteller for their time and vulnerability when sharing their story

# Authors and Contributors

This report was written by Sarah E. Lowe,  
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Special thanks to Dr. Aline C. Gubrium at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst; the Define American team; and all those that participated in the study.

To learn more about the research, contact Define American's Director of Research + Impact, Sarah E. Lowe, at [sarah@defineamerican.com](mailto:sarah@defineamerican.com).

# Methodology

## Mental Health and Wellness Survey

Data collection for the survey was administered online by Qualtrics. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling within the immigrant rights network across digital and social media platforms. To qualify, they were required to be U.S. adults between the ages of 25–40, who identified as undocumented or formerly undocumented, and had shared their story in a national or large regional outlet prior to the enactment of DACA. We recruited 40 participants. The survey included measures on: Belonging, Depression, Post-Traumatic Stress, Resilience, Self-Esteem, Social Support, and Stress. All scales are validated and include the: Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D), Cohen Perceived Stress Scale, Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS), Need to Belong Scale, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Checklist - Civilian Version (PCL-C), Resilience Research Centre Adult Resilience Measure (RRC-ARM), and Rosenberg Self-Esteem Inventory. The study was approved by the University of Massachusetts Amherst Institutional Review Board (IRB).

## Life History Interviews

Life history interviews were administered via Zoom, video and/or audio recorded, and transcribed for data collection. Participants who completed the survey and did not score “high severity” for post-traumatic stress disorder were recruited for life history interviews. Fifteen participants met the criteria and consented. Life history interviews draw on traditions of oral history, and the methodology consisted of six questions covering chronological history and pivotal life events.

## Digital Storytelling Workshop

The Digital Storytelling (DST) workshop was held with eight participants in Los Angeles in September 2019 and was open to all participants currently enrolled in the study. The DST workshop was a three-day collaborative process that acted as a forum for the co-construction of knowledge between researchers, facilitators, and participants in examining lived experiences around mental health and storytelling for public advocacy. All participants wrote and audio recorded scripts, collected images, and worked with professional editors to develop their digital stories, one-to-three minute videos that explore a pivotal moment from their lives. We collected and analyzed four types of data from the workshops: (1) transcripts of audio recordings of the session where storytellers workshopped ideas for their stories (story circle) and discussion around the group screening of the completed digital stories (story screening), (2) transcripts of the digital stories, (3) participant observation field notes — examining group dynamics and emerging questions — recorded by two researchers and one researcher assistant, (4) and pre- and post-surveys collected at the beginning and end of the DST workshop.

## Composite Narrative

The qualitative data — transcripts of the (1) life history interviews, (2) DST story circle and story screening sessions, (2) digital stories, and (3) the participant observation field notes recorded by two researchers and one research assistant — were analyzed for sources of mental health distress as well as facilitators of resilience in and around undocumented storytellers. We also identified common themes in attitudes, knowledge, and beliefs. Two researchers and one research assistant, both of whom assisted and observed the DST workshop and one who also facilitated life history interviews, conducted the analysis using a Grounded Theory approach to develop a composite list of free codes around salient themes across storytellers. Two additional research assistants joined the research team to independently analyze free codes and come to consensus on emerging patterns. Content analysis focused on identifying cultural paradigms centered in and around the immigrant rights movement, represented within the report.





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