



## Lives in Limbo: Undocumented and Coming of Age in America

By Roberto G. Gonzales

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**Lives in Limbo: Undocumented and Coming of Age in America** By Roberto G. Gonzales

*“My world seems upside down. I have grown up but I feel like I’m moving backward. And I can’t do anything about it.” –Esperanza*

Over two million of the nation’s eleven million undocumented immigrants have lived in the United States since childhood. Due to a broken immigration system, they grow up to uncertain futures. In *Lives in Limbo*, Roberto G. Gonzales introduces us to two groups: the college-goers, like Ricardo, who had good grades and a strong network of community support that propelled him to college and DREAM Act organizing but still landed in a factory job a few short years after graduation, and the early-exiters, like Gabriel, who failed to make meaningful connections in high school and started navigating dead-end jobs, immigration checkpoints, and a world narrowly circumscribed by legal limitations. This vivid ethnography explores why highly educated undocumented youth share similar work and life outcomes with their less-educated peers, despite the fact that higher education is touted as the path to integration and success in America. Mining the results of an extraordinary twelve-year study that followed 150 undocumented young adults in Los Angeles, *Lives in Limbo* exposes the failures of a system that integrates children into K-12 schools but ultimately denies them the rewards of their labor.

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## **Lives in Limbo: Undocumented and Coming of Age in America By Roberto G. Gonzales Bibliography**

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**Editorial Review**

Review

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

(*nacla: Report on the Americas*)

From the Inside Flap

"Superb. . . . An important examination of the devastating consequences of 'illegality' on our young people."-  
-Junot Díaz, author of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and *This is How You Lose Her*

"*Lives in Limbo* is a book of tragic beauty. It recounts with moral clarity, conceptual precision, and empirical rigor what Hannah Arendt, writing in another terrible time, called 'the calamity of the right-less.' It is about what happens in a society, our society, when children and youth who are de facto but not de jure members of the family of the nation lose the right to have rights. It fearlessly narrates the quotidian empire of suffering and shattered dreams our barbaric immigration system has begotten. Reading it will bring tears and joy. It will make you mad and it will make you sad. It will stand as the definitive study of the undocumented coming of age in our midst. It is a book every teacher, every policymaker, indeed every concerned citizen should read and ponder."--Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco, coeditor of *Latinos: Remaking America*

"Roberto G. Gonzales offers a masterful portrait of the 2.1 million undocumented migrants who arrived as children and grew up in the United States. *Lives in Limbo* chronicles the heartbreak and anguish they experience as they slowly come to realize there is no secure place for them in the only country they know. The compassionate telling of their stories represents qualitative social science at its finest and underscores the urgency of finding a humane solution to their plight."--Douglas S. Massey, coauthor of *Brokered Boundaries: Creating Immigrant Identity in Anti-Immigrant Times*

"*Lives in Limbo* is one of the most important books in immigration studies of the past decade. The moving and heartbreaking narratives of struggle, support, and heroism in this book should be read by every American."--Hirokazu Yoshikawa, author of *Immigrants Raising Citizens: Undocumented Parents and Their Young Children*

"*Lives in Limbo* vividly documents the experiences of belonging and exclusion that mark the everyday lives of undocumented youth as they transition to adulthood. Through his careful attention to the ways in which these young people navigate these contradictory processes, Roberto G. Gonzales puts a human face on the many victims of America's broken immigration system. Theoretically rich, beautifully written, and cogently argued, this brilliant book is a landmark study of the human costs of American policy failures."--Mary C. Waters, coauthor of *Inheriting the City: The Children of Immigrants Come of Age*

"This necessary book documents in tragic detail how American public policies prevent hardworking children from pursuing their lives as full members of the society in which they were raised. The scholarly and personal commitment required to produce a work of this caliber is evident in the intimacy of the ethnographic work. This theoretically skillful book is one of the best examples of high-quality academic scholarship that also fully engages the policy debates of our times. An impressive achievement that will set

the standard for others."--Robert C. Smith, author of *Mexican New York: Transnational Worlds of New Immigrants*

"Written after years of fieldwork, this book brings into sharp focus the plight of undocumented children transitioning to adulthood in America. Lack of a path to citizenship condemns hundreds of thousands of these youths to a life of permanent marginality. This is must reading for anyone wishing to understand the realities of contemporary immigration."--Alejandro Portes, coauthor of *Immigrant America*

"This extraordinary study provides important details about a generation of immigrants that, through the courageous organizing and leadership of its members, has already permanently altered the national debate on immigration reform, politically united the Mexican American community across all generations of presence in the United States, and launched the most vibrant youth movement this country has seen in four decades. The book powerfully demonstrates the national shame in failing to enact, nearly a decade and a half after its first introduction, the congressional legislation that would permit the United States to benefit fully from the intellect, ingenuity, and perseverance of this generation of young immigrants."--Thomas A. Saenz, President and General Counsel, MALDEF (Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund)

"This book accomplishes something truly remarkable. Its ethnographic commitment makes a solid contribution to scholarship without compromising on allowing the reader to experience the poignancy, sadness, distress, and emotional trauma society has inflicted on these unfortunate young people. A must-read for anyone interested in the victims of the current stalemate over immigration reform."--Leo R. Chavez, author of *Covering Immigration: Popular Images and the Politics of the Nation*

About the Author

**Roberto G. Gonzales** is Assistant Professor at Harvard University Graduate School of Education. His work has been featured in such social science journals as the *American Sociological Review* and *Current Anthropology*, as well as in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Time* magazine, *U.S. News & World Report*, and *Chronicle of Higher Education*.

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