

Does Giving Undocumented Immigrants a Driver's License Affect State GDP?

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Abstract

Too often, undocumented immigrants are excluded from policies and social benefits that would allow them to participate in our society. For example, Republican representative Rand Paul proposed to exclude undocumented taxpayers from the Covid stimulus package because he viewed their inclusion as a burden. More importantly, Rand Paul frames the exclusion of undocumented immigrants as an efficient policy practice. However, in recent years, some states have adopted policies that permit undocumented immigrants to obtain driver's licenses. Scholars have found that giving undocumented immigrants drivers licenses positively affects personal disposable income. Beyond this finding, there is limited research on the economic impacts of these state-level policies. This study contributes to the literature by examining the impacts of offering driver's licenses to undocumented immigrants on state-level gross domestic product (GDP). Using state-level data and a difference-in-difference model, this study finds that offering driver's licenses to undocumented immigrants has no statistically significant effect on a state's GDP. Additionally, this study proposes a novel microeconomics framework for conceptualizing and analyzing the multiple pathways through which access to driver's licenses for the undocumented can affect freedom and, in turn, a wide range of socioeconomic impacts for individuals, households, communities and state's economies.

1. Introduction

In 1996, Individual Tax Identification Numbers (ITINs) were created.¹⁴ They are used as a substitute for Social Security Numbers (SSN) in the tax filing process. They help people who are not eligible for an SSN comply with U.S. tax laws. However, they are not a work permit.¹⁵ They are simply a unique identification number like an SSN. While ITINs are used as tax processing numbers, some states have also allowed undocumented immigrants to use them as a substitute for an SSN when applying for a driver's license. Moreover, benefits and tax deductions aren't available to ITIN holders in the same way that they are available to SSN holders. Today, only 16 states allow undocumented immigrants to apply for a driver's license.¹⁰ More recently, undocumented taxpayers were excluded from the Covid-19 stimulus package, after Rand Paul posed a cost-benefit analysis that frames the exclusion of undocumented taxpayers as an efficient policy practice.¹² While it would be interesting to explore the efficiency of excluding undocumented taxpayers from the initial stimulus package, my study uses state gross domestic product (GDP) as a measure of efficiency to test the efficiency of state policies that exclude or include undocumented immigrants. More specifically, I look at the state-level practice of granting undocumented immigrants a driver's license and hypothesize that giving them a license increases state GDP because it increases their freedom and thus ability to interact with society and engage in economic activity. In other words, this study poses an important question: does the exclusion or inclusion of undocumented immigrants in state-level policy affect states' GDP?

2. Theory Overview

When the United States Treasury introduced ITINs as a unique identification number that can be used instead of an SSN in the tax filing process, they created a substitute. These substitutes create a utility curve for immigrants, which begets a market structure with an efficiency point. In this study, the market is the state economy. The market output is state GDP. In microeconomics, the market efficiency point can only be reached under perfect competition, when the market has perfect substitutes. In the case of this study, the market good is a unique identification number. In other words, an ITIN or SSN.

However, an ITIN is not a perfect substitute for an SSN — meaning, it does not offer the same benefits and privileges. Therefore, the market is at an inefficiency point. Using GDP as the market output, in this market for unique identification numbers, we can hypothesize that as states increase their acceptance for an ITIN, as a substitute for a SSN, the utility curve reels into a higher degree of substitutability. Therefore, increasing market output — GDP — because the demand curve approaches the efficiency point as substitutability increases. Assuming there is a positive correlative relationship and causality between increasing substitutability and GDP, this is the logical outcome. This is the logical outcome, because the state is increasing an undocumented immigrant’s ability to engage and participate in the economy more freely. For example, an increase in benefits can lead to an increase in freedom, freedom of movement, freedom of action, freedom to improve one’s education and health and that of their children, and, finally, freedom to engage in economic activity. Possible economic outcomes, in addition to economic production, could include happiness, health, poverty, income, economic mobility, wealth, and overall well-being. However, this study examines impacts on GDP, which may capture many of these outcomes that can be affected by changes in economic freedom.

A critique of our theoretical framework might be that we should focus on established formal theory that illustrates migrants as inputs into production via their labor. However, we are considering the broader ways that the acceptance of alternative documentation can affect freedom and thus economic activity, with GDP capturing just one dimension of these many outcomes. More importantly, this study is not concerned with labor economics. It’s concerned with state behavior and state policy. Therefore, critiques that call for an application of established theory ignore this study’s intention to introduce a new and unexplored topic to immigration economics. Moreover, reviewers that call for the application of established theory halt the research process — the production of new ideas that can be challenged after publication.

While the Treasury Created ITINs, and the IRS issues them, the state can influence the privileges or benefits an ITIN offers. This ability is evident in the policy my study is concerned with. Because states can affect the privileges and benefits of an ITIN, state level policies influence the substitutability of an ITIN. It can increase or decrease it. Figure 1 illustrates this ability.

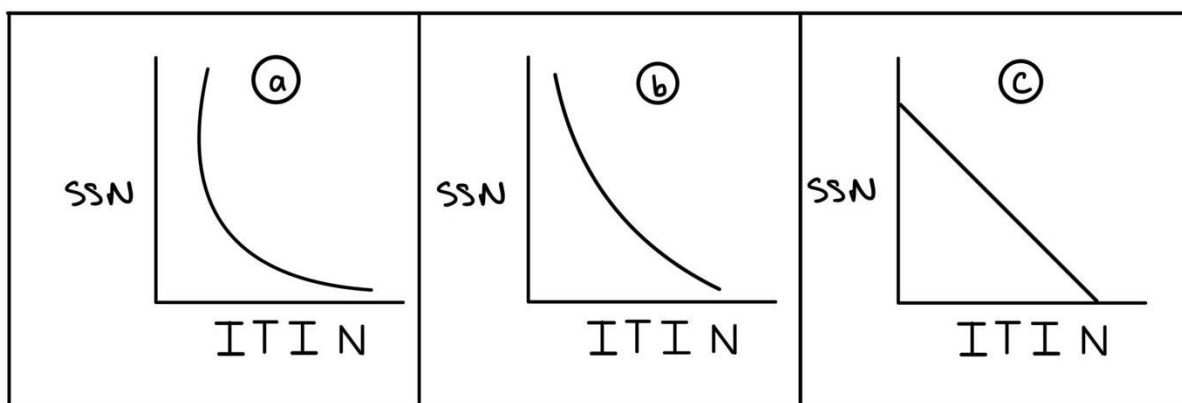


Figure 1. Utility Curves & Substitutability

Figure 1 maps immigrants’ indifference curves under a range of policy scenarios. These indifference curves illustrate a state’s ability to affect the substitutability of an ITIN and SSN. States have the ability to give more rights and privileges to undocumented immigrants, specifically, ITIN holders. From left to right, in the graphs above, substitutability increases as states grant more rights and privileges to ITIN holders, From Right to left, substitutability decreases as states exclude ITIN holders: C = perfect substitutes; a = imperfect substitutes; b’s substitutability = $(a < b < c)$. Graph b shows the case where ITINs and SSNs are imperfect like in Graph a; however, in graph b the degree of substitutability is higher. Lastly, an ITIN and SSN cannot be complementary goods because only unauthorized immigrants can have an ITIN and it’s not possible to have both. Additionally, this model only looks at SSNs that are issued to authorized immigrants. It also includes immigrants with other forms of authorization like visas. However, this model does not include SSNs issued to natural born citizens. Because this study analyzes unique identification numbers as substitutable commodities, it further illustrates the dynamics and mechanics of the indifference curve that the US Treasury created when they introduced ITINs as an alternative unique identification number.

The SSN and ITIN axes represent privileges and constraints, respectively. Note that while indifference curves typically represent different combinations of the goods on the x and y axis that keep utility constant, in this model it is not possible to have more than one SSN or one ITIN – but is possible to have various bundles of privileges and constraints as granted by the different types of documentation *and* it is possible to be indifferent between these various bundles. In other words, Immigrants aren’t making decisions between the different number of SSNs and ITINs that keep utility constant. Instead, they are making decisions between different bundles of constraints and privileges that keep utility constant. The ITIN axis symbolizes the constraint axis whereas the SSN axis symbolizes the Benefits/freedoms/privileges axis.

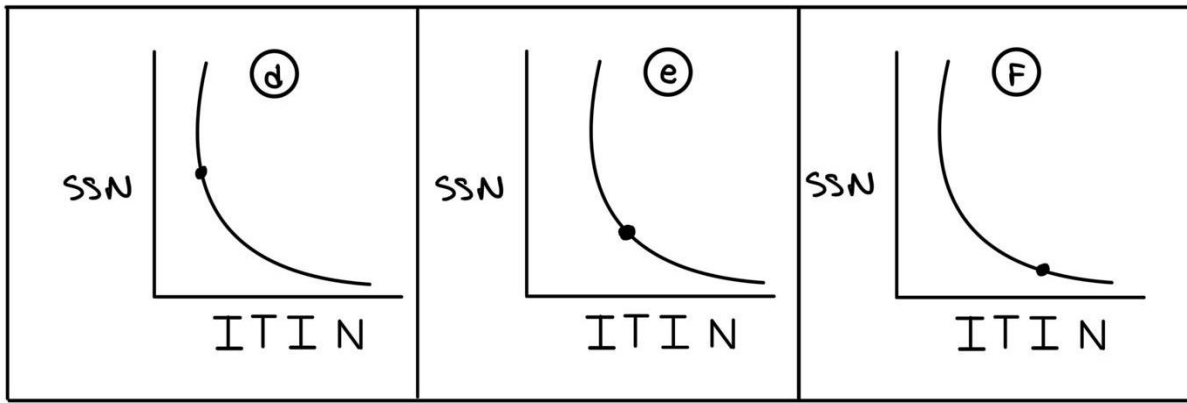


Figure 2. Indifference Curves and Bundles

The graphs in Figure 2 (d, e, f) illustrate different combinations of constraints and privileges. From left to right, as the point moves down, constraints increase, and privileges decrease. From right to left, privileges increase, and constraints decrease. While moving along the curve illustrates the change in constraints and privileges it also illustrates a change in immigration status. As the bundle moves down the curve, the status goes towards undocumented. As the bundle moves up the curve, the status approaches naturalized citizenship. In other words, every point along the curve is a different immigration status with undocumented and full naturalized citizenship being the two extremes. More importantly, in the model presented, utility is constant because of the mythological narrative of the ‘American Dream’ – the belief that anyone can pull themselves up by their bootstraps and improve their economic situation and that of their children in the United States. Most, if not all, immigrants immigrate to the United States (US) because of the economic opportunity, freedom, and (or) security that they see themselves having in the US. In other words, the American Dream is embedded in the model’s utility curve. All bundles are perceived by the immigrant in this model as offering the possibility of living an ‘American Dream’ despite the constraints of their status. Therefore, there is an indifference. Our discussion of the two extremes in the next figure will go into other explanations for the indifference between statuses.

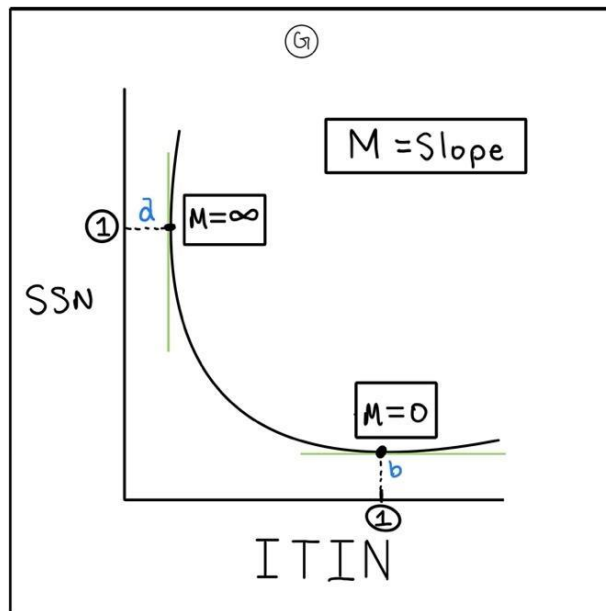


Figure 3. Indifference curve & Immigration Status

Graph G in Figure 3 helps illustrate the two extremes. At point a, an immigrant is a fully naturalized citizen. At point b, the immigrant has not started the naturalization process. They are undocumented. In the case of this study, they are an undocumented taxpayer. However, an undocumented immigrant can easily become naturalized and reach fully naturalized citizenship, which is why both statuses are on the same curve. At the same time, immigrants who immigrate legally can easily become illegal through deliberate choice. For example, Lopez et al. reports the increase in visa overstays during 2017.⁸ These

choices further reinforce an indifference between legal and illegal status. However, that does not mean that legal immigrants cannot become illegal unintentionally.

While one critique of this theoretical approach might be that migrants should strictly prefer documented status, thus the presentation here of documented and undocumented status on the same indifference curve is incorrect, we argue that it is correct because immigrants do not immigrate to the U.S. to be legal or illegal. They immigrate to the US to be in the US. Because both statuses mean an immigrant is in the US there's an implied and underlying indifference. Moreover, if there really were a preference to be legal (or if immigration was about immigrating legally), we would see a 100% legal immigration rate. However, that is not the world we live in. Instead, we see both. This detail further reinforces an indifference. Written in another way, we could say that immigrants don't prefer to be legal or illegal. They prefer to be in the US. Therefore, both statuses lie on the same curve because both methods of immigration satisfy the preference to be in the US.

Additionally, observing preferences for each status is not the primary concern of this study. Future research can criticize and work through the details of immigrant preferences and its exclusion in this study. In the meantime, this study's primary focus is to illustrate the state's ability to influence the substitutability of an ITIN and SSN, and, in turn, investigates whether that influence of substitutability does or does not affect GDP. The literature review further defines this paper's focus on states and its relevance.

A discussion of the state's ability to influence the substitutability of an ITIN and SSN requires a discussion of the indifference curves' slope.

In Figure 3, the slope (M) represents an immigrant's status. When $M = \infty$, an immigrant is fully naturalized. When $M = 0$, they have not started the naturalization process. Because the slope varies between these two points, immigration and naturalization status varies too. Looking at a specific point between a and b requires an investigation of a new and different utility curve that represents that status. However, this study does not endeavor to explore more than a basic microeconomic analysis of the tool that undocumented immigrants use to file their taxes. More importantly, it's important to note that making an ITIN a perfect substitute for an SSN makes all other points along the curve perfect substitutes too. In other words, when the utility curve is in perfect substitutes, all statuses must become equal and offer the same benefits and privileges that a fully naturalized citizen has.

3. Literature Review

While there is not much in-depth literature on ITIN tax filers, a lot of studies do make some interesting points about the effects that immigration has on a community's economy. For example, McDaniel notes that immigration can offset the population decline in Rust Belt cities, and, in turn, revitalize the economy.⁹ Moreover, Gonzalez Et.al. highlights some statistics on states that provide driving privileges to unauthorized immigrants. For example, per capita disposable income increases faster in states that allow undocumented people to obtain a driver's license.⁴ This is an important statistic because if states that provide a driver's license experience a faster increase in disposable income, we can assume that this leads to an increase in GDP, especially if we apply the logic of the Income = Expenditure = GDP model. Other studies like "Living in Car Culture Without a license" also list positive effects of immigration.⁵ However, these studies cite correlational statistics as evidence for their claims. They do not provide causality. More importantly, these studies implicitly ask, how do immigrants affect the economy? I'm asking, did the inclusive/exclusive state level policy affect GDP? The former is an exhausted question in immigration economics literature, whereas the latter remains unanswered.

In addition to posing an unanswered question, my study seeks to fill in a large gap in immigration economics literature. For example, like Pena¹² I'm filling in the research gap on undocumented immigrants. Pena's study shifts the focus on legal immigrants to undocumented immigrants on the welfare magnet question, which asks, do states that offer welfare benefits to immigrants increase their population share of immigrants? This topic has primarily focused on the responsiveness of documented immigrants to welfare programs; however, Pena focuses on the responsiveness of undocumented immigrants. Therefore, Pena fills in the lack of research on undocumented immigrants. This research paper makes a similar contribution because it focuses on unauthorized immigrants instead of authorized immigrants. It specifically focuses on undocumented taxpayers. Moreover, like Cebula³ and Nair-Reichert⁷ I build on existing studies and extend their scope. They extend the study of immigration settlement patterns and immigrant behavior. For example, they use data from Pena's¹² paper to extend the research on immigrant settlement patterns.

While Pena's paper looks at the effects of offering higher education opportunities on immigrant location settlement, Cebula³ looks at the effects sanctuary cities have on their settlement patterns. Policies that promote higher education opportunities require more study and could be incorporated into the difference-in-difference model this paper presents as an additional control variable or replace the primary policy that the key variable is observing. In addition to including this variable in potential research, it would also be interesting to include sanctuary cities, especially because Cebula³ frames them as hubs that promote "the personal freedoms" of undocumented immigrants. Cebula's idea of freedoms overlaps with this paper's focus on states' inclusive policies that grant privileges to ITIN holders or undocumented immigrants.

However, the papers on immigrant settlement patterns ask, what factors influence immigrant behavior? Whereas my research topic implicitly asks, how does state behavior influence the state's economy? In other words, my research frames state-level

policies, that exclude or include undocumented immigrants, as states' behavior. This is an important distinction to make because it further defines my research question. Even though this study is contributing to a gap in immigration economics literature and building on existing research, it shifts away from the focus on the behavior of undocumented immigrants to states' behavior. Since this study frames states' policy as states behavior, the implicit question this study poses could be rewritten to ask, are states engaging in GDP maximizing behavior when they exclude or include undocumented immigrants?

4. Data and Methods

I will use state-level data and employ a difference-in-difference model to econometrically identify the impact of the driver's license policy on state GDP and tax revenues.

$$\text{State GDP} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Policy} + \beta_2 \text{Time} + \beta_3 \text{Policy} * \text{Time} + \beta_4 \text{State Unemployment Rate} + \beta_5 \text{State Tax Revenues} \quad (1)$$

$$\text{State Tax Revenue} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Policy} + \beta_2 \text{Time} + \beta_3 \text{Policy} * \text{Time} + \beta_4 \text{State Unemployment Rate} + \beta_5 \text{State GDP} \quad (2)$$

I create a treatment and control group using data from the "Policy Analysis of Driver's Licenses for Undocumented Rhode Islanders".⁴ My treatment group consists of states that offer driver's licenses to undocumented immigrants. The treatment states are California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Washington D.C., Hawaii, Illinois, Maryland, New York, Vermont. Treatment states are coded as 1. The control group consists of all other states, which are coded 0. *Policy* represents this binary treatment/control variable. *Time* is coded as a binary 0/1 variable, where 0 represents 2013, the pre-policy period, and 1 represents 2018, the post-policy period. States that adopted the Inclusive driver's license policy adopted them between 2014 and 2017, with most adopters enacting the policies in 2015 and 2016. The states of Maine, New Mexico, Oregon, Tennessee, Utah, and Washington are excluded from this analysis because they don't meet the criteria for the *Time* variable. This yields 94 observations for my analysis. The treatment effect of the policy is given by the coefficient on the interaction of *Policy* and *Time*, B_3 .

I control for state employment rate and state tax revenues. Data for the dependent variable (State GDP) is gathered from the Bureau of Economic Analysis,¹ data for state employment rates comes from the Bureau of Labor Statistics,² and data on tax revenues comes from the United States Census Bureau.⁶ Tax revenues reported by industries are summed for each state.

This study hypothesizes that B_3 will have a significant and positive effect on GDP because the inclusive driver's license policies could promote a broad range of undocumented immigrants' economic activity, which, through various pathways, should ultimately impact GDP. Moreover, unemployment and tax revenues should have a positive relationship with GDP because they are closely related. Therefore, we can predict a positive effect on the dependent variable. Equation (2) is used to test the hypothesis that adopting the driver's license policy should increase tax revenues. I hypothesize that the treatment variable and the control variables in Equation (2) should positively affect GDP. For both Equations (1) and (2) I also run base versions of my models, which do not include the control variables.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Obs.	Mean	Std. dev.	Min	Max
GDP	94	369003.6	483804.4	29098.8	2968118
State Tax Revenues	94	1.89e+07	2.58e+07	536929	1.78e+08
Unemployment Rate	94	23.48936	13.59217	1	51

5. Results

Results of the difference-in-difference models are shown in Table 2. While the base model for Equation (1) has a positive correlation with state GDP, the variables are not statistically significant. Therefore, this study does not find any evidence that providing drivers licenses to undocumented immigrants affects GDP. In addition to not finding evidence that providing a driver's license to undocumented immigrants affects GDP, the study also found that providing driver's licenses to unauthorized immigrants does not have a statistically significant effect on a state's tax revenues. However, the model that looks at the effect on GDP finds that tax revenues do influence GDP. This is because tax revenues have an approximate linear relationship with

GDP. This relationship absorbs most of the variance in GDP which explains the second model's high Adjusted R² for my primary equation. Furthermore, the close relationship between GDP and tax revenues explains why GDP is the only statistically significant variable in the second model for the second equation.

Table 2 Results: Impact Evaluation of Driver's License Policy on State GDP and Tax Revenues

y= GDP	Base Model	2 nd Model	Y = tax Revenues	Base Model	2 nd model
Constant	273814.4 (77505.21)	22281.48 (44546.32)	Constant	1.35e+07 (4063438)	-1506830 (2329933)
Policy	277647.3 (168027.3)	-46092.88 (40289.18)	Policy	1.74e+07 (8809323)	3200964 (2097326)
time	54148.65 (109608.9)	13504.93 (35566.07)	Time	2218352 (5746569)	102842.4 (1863497)
Policy*time	84985.25 (237626.5)	-18002.16 (55947.26)	Policy*Time	5556164 (1.25e+07)	1354340 (2927192)
Tax Revenues	—	.0185531 (.00) ***	GDP	—	50.85163 (1.327112) ***
Unemployment	—	26.98758 (1279.634)	Unemployment	—	33533.21 (66897.91)
N	94	94	N	94	94
Adjusted R ²	0.0504	.9479	Adjusted R ²	0.0809	.1212

*** indicates significance at 0% level

6. Discussion and Conclusion

Although this study did not detect a statistically significant relationship between state adoption of inclusive driver's license policies and GDP, it would be premature to take these findings as strong evidence that increasing undocumented people's privileges and freedoms has no effect on economic activity and GDP. Instead, it may be that this study failed to detect a statistically significant relationship due to the short time-period of the study; it may take more years for these effects to materialize. Further, this study did not control for the great variation in population sizes across states, which also affects states' GDP. Future research could instead use per capita GDP as a dependent variable.

This paper does however make an interesting contribution to the literature by outlining an original theoretical framework for conceptualizing how states' behavior can affect GDP. This study also poses a new and novel research question. It is concerned with states' behavior instead of immigrant behavior and undocumented immigrants instead of documented immigrants. It specifically extends the existing literature to include ITIN holders or undocumented taxpayers. It also poses various questions and topics that need to be explored further in immigration economics. For example, is the state engaging in GDP maximizing behavior when it includes or excludes undocumented immigrants? Is it really an efficient policy practice to exclude undocumented immigrants? These questions require more research. More importantly, this study provided an analysis of ITINs and SSNs that is needed to understand the conditions that we create for undocumented immigrants. Future research could control for a lot of other policies that would have impacted state economies across the nation. It can also control for other inclusive or exclusive policy practices like higher education opportunities that Pena looks at in their research.¹¹ In summary, the topics of this paper are in their infancy and need further investigation.

While our study did not find any conclusive results to make policy suggestions, we do encourage the acceptance of alternative forms of documentation because it was and continues to be a common practice in the United States. For example, the National Conference of State Legislators reports, "...[states] issue a license if an applicant provides certain documentation, such as a

foreign birth certificate, foreign passport, or consular card and evidence of current residency in the state.”¹² States have the power to push for the acceptance of alternative forms of documentation. More importantly, they can push for the acceptance of an ITIN as a substitute for an SSN. This creates a path to be recognized as a person under the law without needing to go through the naturalization process.

Moreover, the acceptance of an ITIN as a substitute will lead to the decommodification of rights and humanness in the United States. However, it is important to acknowledge that this study is not the first to deliver an implicit critique of the immigration system through a microeconomic analysis. Walla & Dilts explicitly critique it:

“I think no one is illegal, or no human being is illegal, is a profound idea; the idea that we cannot criminalize a person simply for existing. We live in a world where we call people “illegal” and this happens because we have normalized the idea that the act of crossing a border is a so-called criminal act. The criminalization of migration represents a profound injustice where the state, like corporations, attains the status of personhood that is supposedly being violated or trespassed, thus rendering human beings as non-status. To be a non-status or undocumented person is to be a non-person of sorts, especially in the state-sanctioned legal sense of citizenship. This is then further racialized as migrants of color are cast as “terrorists” and “threats” etc. So, no human being is illegal is the affirmation that, as Eduardo Galeano has said, “the world was born yearning to be a home for everyone.””¹⁵

This quotation begets a final question that this study will pose: will the acceptance of an ITIN as a perfect substitute for an SSN be the first step to making the world feel like a home for everyone?

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