



LUND UNIVERSITY  
Faculty of Social Sciences

Graduate School

Course: SIMV07

Master of Science in Global Studies

Term: Spring 2018

Major: Sociology

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***Indiscriminate Disasters and Disproportionate Effects:  
A Community Left Behind***

*A Qualitative Interview Study on the Undocumented Community in  
the Northern California 2017 Fire*

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## **Abstract**

Natural disasters are distressing and destructive for all who are exposed to them; however, certain populations are more vulnerable to their devastating effects than others. In the wake of the 2017 Northern California wildfire, scores of undocumented immigrants were significantly affected. Although the conflagration spread indiscriminately, the subsequent impacts were disproportionately felt by the undocumented community.

This qualitative study examines two designed dimensions: (1) the day-to-day characteristics of the undocumented community and (2) the impact of the Northern California wildfire 2017 on the local undocumented community. These elements are explored and analyzed using the concept of biopolitics, as well as a vulnerability and resilience framework. The study finds that undocumented immigrants have little to no opportunity to improve their socioeconomic position; live in fear of authorities; have limited access to emergency relief funds; and are additionally impacted by the prevailing anti-immigration sentiment emerging from the current White House administration. These and other sociopolitical factors leave undocumented persons marginalized, neglected and unprotected. As a population with a predetermined high vulnerability and minimal resilience, the undocumented community appears to have been left behind by the federal government following the 2017 NorCal fire.

**Key Words:** Northern California wildfire 2017, NorCal fire, undocumented immigrants, biopolitics, vulnerability and resilience.

**Word Count:** 21.139

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## **List of Abbreviations**

|           |  |
|-----------|--|
| ASA       | American Sociological Association                      |
| CAL FIRE  | California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection  |
| CBO       | Community Based Organization                           |
| DACA      | Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals                 |
| DHS       | Department of Homeland Security                        |
| DREAM Act | Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors Act |
| FEMA      | Federal Emergency Management Agency                    |
| ICE       | Immigration and Customs Enforcement                    |
| IRS       | Internal Revenue Service                               |
| LEP       | Limited English Proficient                             |
| LRA       | Local Responsibility Areas                             |
| MPI       | Migration Policy Institute                             |
| NGO       | Non-Governmental Organization                          |
| SB54      | Senate Bill 54   |
| UFW       | United Farm Workers                                    |
| WUI       | Wildland Urban Interface                               |

## **Acknowledgement**

I would first like to thank my thesis supervisor Christopher Mathieu of the Department of Sociology at Lund University for his advice and guidance in the research process. Secondly, my sincere thanks goes out to all interview partners who were kind enough to participate and offer their knowledge and share their personal experiences. Without their participation and input, the study could not have been successfully conducted.

Jenner Balagot, thank you for your support throughout the research process, the countless brainstorming sessions over the phone across the ocean and your editorial contributions.

Thank you Erin Flanagan for your enormous help and support towards the end of the writing process. Your contributions were invaluable.

Lastly, I would also like to thank my parents for their continuous support in pursuing my Master's Degree in Sweden.

## 1. Introduction

*“The poor are living in crisis before a disaster strikes. Thus, when a disaster does occur, it must be recognized that those already living in poverty are impacted in different and significant ways as compared to other members of society” (Fothergill and Peek 2004: 106).*

Research centers estimate that about 11.1 undocumented immigrants are residing unauthorized in the United States. In 2014 the majority of this population, an estimated 2.35 to 2.6 million, lived in California, of which 78% are from Latin America (Public Policy Institute of California, 2018). These undocumented immigrants face a myriad of challenges to arrive, settle and reside in the US. In order to fully comprehend their struggles, one must understand the daily life of an undocumented immigrant, the community to which they belong and the immigration debate between sanctuary states like California and the unsympathetic federal government. The plight of the undocumented immigrants can be characterized by Coutin (2007) “[they] can be physically present but legally absent, existing in a space outside of society, a space of ‘nonexistence,’ a space that is not actually ‘elsewhere’ or beyond borders but that is rather a hidden dimension of social reality” (Coutin, 2007: 9).

In October of 2017, Northern California experienced the most detrimental, widespread fire in the state’s modern history<sup>1</sup>. Clearly constituting a major natural disaster, it destroyed not only physical structures but also the economy, damaging the construction, agriculture, and hospitality industries. These particular sectors employed a high number of undocumented immigrants. Moreover, the affected areas were home to a significant number of unauthorized immigrants, living on the margins of society. Any community would be devastated by the destruction of a natural disaster and the subsequent recovery efforts. However, facing this desolation as an undocumented

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<sup>1</sup> This paper uses the term ‘NorCal fire’ or ‘NorCal wildfire’ in order to refer to the Northern California fire.

immigrant without equivalent access to vital resources, exacerbates their already vulnerable state.

In this regard, the key aspects of analyzing wildfires' effects on the undocumented population must consider the prevailing socio political factors. The social system of undocumented immigrants includes California's historically significant undocumented immigrant culture as well as the social stratification of this population. Since the inauguration of the Trump Administration, massive changes in immigration integration are expected and the political climate between the liberal state of California and the conservative White House has intensified.

### **1.1 Research Aim**

The overall goal of this research paper is to identify the characteristics of the day-to-day lives of undocumented immigrants and to explore how a natural disaster, such as the NorCal fire in October 2017, affected this specific population. With this in mind, the study poses three research questions, the first of which seeks to characterize the undocumented community's daily life under the current US political climate.

*How can the undocumented immigrants' daily challenges be comprehended given the backdrop of the current US political climate through the framework of biopolitics?*

As the research question implies, Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics is used to examine the daily challenges of the undocumented community under the current White House administration. This research question represents the initial stride toward a more comprehensive understanding of the conditions under which undocumented immigrants live. Subsequently, this study proceeds to uncover how the devastating wildfire further impacted their life circumstances. Hence, the second research question asks,

*How has the NorCal 2017 fire affected the vulnerability and resilience of the local undocumented community?*



Building upon knowledge gleaned from the first research question, this inquiry aims to identify the factors which affect the undocumented community's degree of vulnerability as well as their resilience in the case of the NorCal 2017 wildfire. To this end, the concepts of vulnerability and resilience in natural disasters are used as guiding tools. Lastly, the research concludes with an examination of the exclusion of undocumented immigrants from emergency funds by the federal government:

*Given the exclusion of undocumented immigrants from disaster funds, how can the intentions of the current White House administration be explained using the concept of biopolitics?*

Thus, the overall goal of this research is to equally outline two dimensions: (1) the day-to-day characteristics of undocumented immigrants and (2) the additional hardships undocumented immigrants incur from a natural disaster.

## **1.2 Limitation**

This research paper is limited by the categorization of ‘undocumented immigrants’ as one homogeneous group, based upon their common illegal residence within the borders of the United States. This definition does not differentiate between the undocumented persons’ varying countries of origin. However, the majority of the undocumented immigrants in the US are Latinos<sup>2</sup>, thus their representation in the field of study appears to dominate. Furthermore, the geographic location in which the NorCal fire took place has a strong representation of local and national organizations supporting especially the Latino community. Nevertheless, it cannot be ruled out that there are great differences among the various ethnicities of undocumented immigrant residing in the United States, or more precisely within the state of California. However, this differentiation is beyond the limits of this research paper.

Additionally, this research assumes that the undocumented immigrants’ life

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<sup>2</sup> This study uses the terms Latino and Hispanic to refer to people with ancestry from Latin American countries and is inclusive of male and female (Latino/Latina). However, it is emphasized that this does not refer to a homogeneous ethnic group nor that they are automatically undocumented immigrants.

circumstances and the consequences of the disaster discussed are primarily instigated and continuously influenced by their lack of legal status.

The decision was also made to include experts who are actively engaged with the undocumented community and, thus, could confidently inform about their lives before, during and after the NorCal fire. However, it needs to be stressed that the experts' chosen work with and live among undocumented immigrants. With this, it is understandable that their approach to and perception of the topic may be biased. All of the experts have a strong opinion about how the current White House administration speaks against immigrants, especially Latino immigrants. Nevertheless, their subjective view provides information about the prevailing opinions of all community members that are eager to support undocumented immigrants, especially during times of a disaster.

### **1.3 Disposition**

The second chapter focuses on providing the reader with a definition of an undocumented immigrant and outlines their socio-demographics in California. Moreover, it introduces the reader to the NorCal fire in greater detail. The third chapter centers around previous literature with significant emphasis on US-based social science disaster research and the impact on marginalized groups, such as undocumented immigrants. Next, the fourth chapter of this research describes the chosen theoretical frameworks which are used as an explanatory tool for the research's aim. This chapter starts by defining Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics and continues with the explanation of the framework of vulnerability and resilience within a disaster context. In the fifth chapter, the methodological approach to this interview study are summarized and illustrated. Moreover, it includes ethical as well as reflexive considerations. The sixth chapter constitutes the heart of this research. Here, the results of the interviews are presented and successively analyzed. More specifically, this section is separated first into the dimension of the general day-to-day lives of the

undocumented community and, secondly, the dimension concerning the NorCal fire's effects on the local undocumented community. In this chapter, the study seeks to answer the aforementioned research questions. Lastly, chapter seven summarizes and briefly discusses the findings of this study and concludes with recommendations for future research.

## **2. Background Information**

This chapter provides the reader with a fundamental understanding of the socio-demographics of the undocumented immigrants in California. Furthermore, it provides details on the fire that affected the multiple counties in Northern California.

### **2.1 Population of Interest**

#### **2.1.1 Definition of Undocumented Immigrants**

“Illegal immigrants”, “illegal aliens”, “illegals”, “unauthorized immigrants”, “undocumented immigrants” or similar terms are commonly used to describe this population. This research paper, however, refrains from using the phrases including “illegal” as they can be considered derogatory and dehumanizing. Instead, the terms undocumented or unauthorized immigrants are used here. Generally, unauthorized immigrants are to be identified by the absence of *“a valid visa or other immigration document, because they entered the United States illegally (usually across the Mexican border), stayed longer than their temporary visas permitted, or otherwise violated the terms under which they were admitted”* (Fortuny, Capps, and Passel, 2007: 3).

#### **2.1.2 Undocumented Immigrants in California**

It is assumed that as of today approximately 11.1 million undocumented immigrants reside in the United States, of which 54% live in the following four states: California (27%), Texas (13%), New York (8%) and Florida (6%) (Zong and Batalova, 2017)<sup>3</sup>. The following table indicates significant socio-demographic structures of California’s undocumented population, provided by the Migration Policy Institute (2018).

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<sup>3</sup> For detailed description on how to estimate the number of undocumented immigrants in the United States see: Passel (2016).

## Socio-demographics Profile California

| Socio-demographics                                 | Estimate         | % of Total |
|--|------------------|------------|
| <b>Undocumented Population</b>                     | <b>3,019,000</b> | <b>100</b> |
| <b>Top Region of Origin</b>                        |                  |            |
| Mexico and Central America                         | 2,498,000        | 83         |
| Asia   | 385,000          | 13         |
| South America                                      | 40,000           | 1          |
| <b>Top 3 Countries of Origin</b>                   |                  |            |
| Mexico   | 2,127,000        | 70         |
| Guatemala  | 200,000          | 7          |
| El Salvador  | 114,000          | 4          |
| <b>Family</b>                                      |                  |            |
| Population 15 and older                            | 2,843,000        | 100        |
| Reside with at least one US-citizen child under 18 | 975,000          | 34         |
| Reside with non citizen children only under 18     | 130,000          | 5          |
| Reside with no children                            | 1,739,000        | 61         |
| <b>Education</b>                                   |                  |            |
| Population 25 and older                            | 2,413,000        | 100        |
| Lower than High school diploma or GED              | 1,381,000        | 58         |
| High school diploma or GED                         | 516,000          | 21         |
| Some college or associate's degree                 | 275,000          | 11         |
| Bachelor's, graduate, or professional degree       | 240,000          | 10         |
| <b>Language Proficiency</b>                        |                  |            |
| speak English <i>"not well"/"not at all"</i>       | 1,619,000        | 54         |

| <b>Labor Force Participation</b> |           |    |
|----------------------------------|-----------|----|
| Employed                         | 1,723,000 | 61 |
| Unemployed                       | 220,000   | 8  |
| Not in the labor force           | 867,000   | 31 |

(Migration Policy Institute, 2018)

### 2.1.3 California's Immigration History

California has the largest immigrant population in the United States and people have continued to immigrate throughout history due to the expansive employment opportunities. Many immigrants left their homeland with little skills and basic education and thus had few employment options outside of manual labor. Additionally, many immigrated without proper legal authorization and were therefore limited in the job market. Many of these undocumented persons were employed by the agriculture industry and were ultimately taken advantage of because of their lack of legal or political representation. In response, in the 1960's Cesar Chavez started a labor movement and founded the United Farm Workers (UFW) Union to help provide social justice for the 50,000 field workers in California and Florida. This movement helped establish representation for many undocumented immigrants and provide them with resources and support (Del Castillo and Garcia, 1997). It continues to present day and evolved into the creation of the sanctuary state in California (California Legislative Information, 2018). Senate Bill 54 (SB54) was enacted in October 5, 2017, which barred local law enforcement from informing federal law enforcement when they apprehend a person suspected be of undocumented status. This created friction within the US and sparked a national debate between sanctuary states like California and the US Federal Government, leading to the Trump Administration suing California in early 2018 (Office of Governor, 2018).

This controversy surrounding undocumented immigrants in California is not recent; in fact, it was a key theme in California especially in the 1990s. California Proposition

187 was a ballot initiative passed by California voters in 1994 that would establish a state-run citizenship screening system and prohibit undocumented immigrants from using non-emergency health care, public education, and other services offered by the government of California (California State Senate, SB 396). At this time there were an estimated 1.3 million undocumented immigrants. However, the ballot was brought to federal court, deemed unconstitutional and therefore repealed. Although the ballot did not reach fruition, the anti-immigration sentiment was apparent (Margolis, 1994). On the contrary, in 2001, the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act (DREAM Act) was first introduced and aimed to create a path to allow undocumented minor immigrants to become permanent legal citizens (Bill Summary & Status, 2001–2002). However, it was never passed even after being re-introduced several times. Later in June 2012, the Obama Administration established the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) policy to allow certain minors that arrived illegally to defer deportation while they applied for legal residency in the United States, and in some cases they were also authorized for legal employment (The White House, 2012). In 2014, the Obama Administration attempted to expand DACA but was unsuccessful (The White House, 2014). Then in 2017, the newly elected Trump Administration announced it would begin to phase out DACA and, with that, added fuel to the xenophobic temperament in the US (The White House, 2017).

## **2.2 The 2017 NorCal Wildfire**

On October 4<sup>th</sup> 2017, one of the most destructive wildfires in California's history ignited in northern California. The wildfires occurred approximately 80 kilometers north of San Francisco yet the fumes were visible from a 150 kilometer radius, and people all over the Bay Area reported respiratory problems from the smoke. The wildfire was an aggregate of multiple fires that blanketed several counties in northern California and burned for four weeks. The cause of the conflagration was still under

investigation during the writing of this paper; however, the destruction altered the lives of many people especially the undocumented immigrants.

Four of the major wildfires were known as the Atlas Fire, Nuns Fire, Redwood Valley Fire, and the Tubbs Fire and collectively referred in this paper as the Northern California Wildfire (NorCal fire) that burned about 245,000 acres, destroying 8,900 structures, causing 44 deaths, and resulting in about \$9.4 billion in damages (CAL FIRE, 2017; Tierney, 2018 and Griggs et al., 2017). In addition, the wildfires were predicted to have a ripple effect causing an additional \$85 billion in damages to the US economy because of its impact on California's industries such as hospitality, construction, real estate, and agriculture (Lada, 2017 and Statistic Atlas, 2015).

The combination of dry bush and grass as well as seasonal winds encouraged the wildfires to spread quickly. Due to California's six-year long drought starting in 2011, California governor Jerry Brown officially declared a state of emergency drought in a proclamation on January 17, 2014 (Office of Governor, 2014).

Initial analysis show that emergency information was not quickly communicated to the public and first responders, causing confusion and even misinformation. By October 10, 2017, the wildfires were still not contained but continued to expand and threaten more urban areas. As a result of the simultaneous wildfires, fire stations could not provide support to their neighboring counties and were soon depleting their resources. In response to the magnitude of the uncontrollable wildfires, Governor Jerry Brown, again, declared a state of emergency. The governor requested all of California's resources to combat the wildfire, including assistance from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) (Vargas, 2017). Consequently, US President Trump declared the NorCal wildfire a major disaster committing FEMA, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and other federal government resources to battling the wildfire (The White House, 2017).

Eventually, on October 31, 2017, after 27 days the NorCal wildfires were finally contained. However, a challenging recovery process had just begun for the state of California and the victims themselves (CAL FIRE, 2017).



### 2.2.1 Wildland Urban Interface

Much of the affected area is located in or near California's wildland-urban interface zones (WUI). The WUI is an area where human structures meet undeveloped wildland and, therefore, are particularly prone to wildfires (State of California, 2012). Because of Southern California's past decades of catastrophic fires, WUI fires have been recognized as a *public policy problem* at the state level and, consequently, led to the passing of the 1992 Bates Bill after the Oakland Hills Fire (Tunnel Fire) of 1991. The Bates Bill requires identification of *high fire hazard severity zones* in Local Responsibility Areas (LRA)<sup>4</sup> in each county of California through the collective work of CAL FIRE and local governments (State of California, 2012). On a national level, WUI fire is defined as a *natural hazard and public policy problem*; furthermore, the federal government implements fires in the definition of *major disaster* (according to the Disaster Relief Act 1974) (Plevel, 1997: 13).

### 2.2.2 Geographic Location and Economy

The nine counties affected by the wildfire have diverse economic industries, which include agriculture, business services, construction, education services, financial services, hospitality, manufacturing, and transportation. However, all affected counties have a common thread in that their economies are dependent on tourism and agriculture. California has the largest agriculture economy compared to other states in the US (Statistic Atlas, 2015).

Agriculture in California was estimated to be a \$46 billion industry in 2016 (California Department of Food & Agriculture). Napa County's economy, for example, is largely dependent on wine production and this sector in Napa holds a long history of

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<sup>4</sup> "*Local Responsibility Area*: Wildland fire protection in California is the responsibility of either the State, local government, or the federal government. Local responsibility areas include incorporated cities, cultivated agriculture lands, and portions of the desert. Local responsibility area fire protection is typically provided by city fire departments, fire protection districts, counties, and by CAL FIRE under contract to local government" (State of California, 2012).

welcoming immigrants, especially from Mexico<sup>5</sup>. The rapid increase of Napa's wine industry from 50 wineries in 1970 to 800 in 2012 has created additional employment opportunities for immigrants in other sectors such as hospitality, tourism and manufacturing.

In 2007, immigrants made up about 31% of Napa's workforce and were immigrants mostly from Latin America. While the local employment rates of Latino immigrant men are very high, 89% in 2008, incomes were low, which correlates to lower education level and limited English proficiency. The median earnings of immigrant workers are lower (\$26,000) than US-born workers (\$41,000); more specifically, Latino-immigrant workers median income lies at \$24,000. Furthermore, 89% of immigrant workers in the agriculture sector are Limited English Proficient (LEP) and 86% lack high school education. The percentage of immigrant workers in the agriculture sector totals 73% and hence, constitute the mainstay of Napa's winery labor force. The hospitality industry, which is considered a complimentary industry to the wine industry, totaled 29 % of immigrant workers, manufacturing 39% and construction 37% (Capps, McCabe, & Fix, 2012). As these numbers indicate, the industries rely heavily on immigrant workers, some of which are undocumented immigrants, residing and working without legal status.

The background information introduced in this chapter, sets the stage to discuss the research field of natural disasters and undocumented immigrants. The next chapter will take the key terminology, facts and events from the fire and contextualize them among previous research.

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<sup>5</sup> The following data is used from the "Profile of Immigrants in Napa" Report (Capps, McCabe, & Fix, May 2012), produced by the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) and commissioned by the Napa Valley Community Foundation.

### 3. Literature Review

#### 3.1 Sociological Research on Natural Disasters

Natural disasters are part of the idiosyncratic life of people. Previously natural disasters were characterized and explained as unique, uncontrollable events, often referred to as willful acts of God that could not be foreseen or influenced (Fothergill and Peek, 2004; Van Zandt et al., 2014). The characteristics of a disaster were understood predominantly as exceptional, haphazard events hence, the efforts in scholarly research have primarily been placed on *disaster response* and *preparedness*. Disaster mitigation and the process of recovery reduction, however, have been largely neglected. The literature highlights the significance of recognizing that a natural disaster only materializes when humans are involved. Hurricanes, fires, droughts, earthquakes, and so forth without the interaction or damage of mankind are merely a natural incident. Van Zandt et al., (2014) implies that “*natural disasters are an outcome of an interaction between the biophysical systems, our human systems, and the built environment we create*” (Van Zandt et al., 2014: 8). As humankind continues to expand its reaches into hazardous areas such as fire-prone WUI areas or along hurricane-prone coastlines, the risk of more severe impacts on humanity increases steadily and may be defined as “*disaster by design*” (Van Zandt et al., 2014: 8).

It is important to note that some people are more susceptible to the severe effects of an environmental disaster. The extent of vulnerability to a natural disaster is, in fact, created and shaped by contemporary society. Similar to the aforementioned statement, Wisner et al. (2004) insist that disasters are not a solely natural event, but they are rather “*the product of social, political and economic environments*” (Wisner et al., 2004: 4).

The ancient assumption that natural disasters are indiscriminate acts of God is hence inaccurate. While the occurrence of disasters can be arbitrary, the impact on society and its social stratification is not. Therefore, one’s position in any pre-existing social

strata determines one's life experience, opportunities and overall welfare. Natural disasters' differing magnitude of effects on societies, and especially marginalized groups, have thus become a substantial element of research in social sciences. Socioeconomic status, race and ethnicity, poverty, class and gender can be understood as complex, interconnected attributes which have a major effect on social behavior and, thus, the impact of a disaster (Fothergill and Peek, 2004).

### **3.1.1 Chronological Order of US-Based Disaster Research**

Bolin's review in the sociological Handbook of Disaster Research (2007) analyzes U.S. disaster research beginning in the 1950s. Bolin's chronological presentation of studies features an overview and development of the prevailing social science studies that have been conducted over the past 70 years.

Starting in the 1950s and early 1960s, little attention was paid to the diversity of victims and racial or class-related inequalities among them. Indeed, Bolin highlights that only minor, subsidiary findings around these topics were mentioned. The sociological approach to natural disasters in the US aimed to generally characterize the events and present the overall effects on an impacted community. Hence, early disaster research investigated the demographic discrepancies specifically in alerting communities, emergency response, and evacuation (Bolin in Andersson, Kennedy, & Ressler, 2007: 113-129).

It was not until the 1970s that the field of natural disaster research expanded to include reconstruction and recovery. Associated therewith, studies focusing on racial, ethnic and socioeconomic differences in disaster response increased. However, the spectrum of studies as well as the variety of contexts, methods and theoretical conceptualizations used, hardly allow the generalization of findings since the 1970s. (Fothergill, Maestas, & Darlington, 1999: 157; Bolin in Rodríguez et al., 2007: 120). Despite this heightened focus on race and ethnicity, class-related phenomena have received far less attention. Emphasis was restricted to socioeconomic differences related to income, rather than

on class structures and the interplay of local political economies and the spatial division of urban space (Bolin in Rodríguez et al., 2007).

Research in the 1980s, for the first time, included the comparison of ethnic groups and showed differences in risk perception, preparedness and warning response among ethnicities in times of disaster. Additionally, Bolin (2007) identified the main research approach during the 1980's as quantitative.

More recent studies (beyond the 1980's) prioritizing race and class were shaped by and conducted after earthquake and hurricane disasters especially in California and Florida. Language barriers and other cultural-related obstacles were the target of investigation in the 1990s. Moreover, ethnographic research offered insight into how people from different communities - including race, class, age, gender - encounter disasters. Studies conducted in the 1990s perpetually reported the failing of the political system, unequal treatment of ethnic groups and how assistance for the homeless, Latino farmworkers, and low-income African Americans was at its worst. Additionally, studies highlighted how pre-existing social disadvantages among already vulnerable social groups persistently influenced the recovery process negatively (Bolin in Rodríguez et al., 2007: 122).

*“However, the research also demonstrates that race or ethnicity by itself is not an adequate explanatory element: What matters is how these factors (and immigration status, gender, and age) intersect in spatially specific ways to shape a person's class locations and his or her access to social and economic resources. That is, race, ethnicity, and other “identity” factors are intertwined with class processes and the privileges or disadvantages that flow from these converge to shape a person's vulnerability to hazard events”* (Bolin in Rodríguez et al., 2007: 122).

Consequently, this was the beginning for research on social groups' vulnerability in the disaster context. It was found *“that the status of vulnerability might be increased with a person's age, gender, social class, race, and ethnicity”* (Fothergill and Peek, 2004: 90).

With their already marginalized status, undocumented persons constitute a particularly vulnerable group. The next section presents the particular trials faced by undocumented immigrants throughout natural disasters.

### **3.2 Undocumented Immigrants in Natural Disasters**

It is understood that undocumented individuals in the United States are somewhat invisible and live a life outside of the public eye, especially the ‘legal’ sphere; hence, it is reasonable to conclude that data of natural disasters’ impacts on these individuals are limited and, arguably, insufficient. The US federal government identifies undocumented immigrants as “*illegal aliens*” (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, 2018), people who reside in the country without the government’s permission. After all, the Trump administration’s current rhetoric asserts that immigrants residing in the US “*without authorization is a violation of the law*”. Moreover, “*they are pariahs, criminals who menace American neighborhoods, take American jobs, sap American resources and exploit American generosity: They are people who should be, and will be, expelled*” (Yee, Davis, & Patel, 2017).

The literature review specifically conducted on undocumented immigrants experiencing natural disasters in the US, but especially California made it apparent that Latino immigrant groups were the most significant among marginalized groups. Here, it is vital to note that Latino immigrant workers can be both legally and illegally employed, but the literature fails to make this distinction, often using “Latino immigrant” synonymously with undocumented immigrant.

Undocumented immigrants in the literature are, however, identified as part of the most vulnerable and exposed social groups due to the lack of governmental support and access to disaster relief as well as language barriers and accompanying fear of authorities (Bolin and Stanford, 1998; Fothergill and Peek, 2004 and Weerasinghe et al., 2015).

These findings are also identified in the study of Carter-Pokras, Zambrana, Mora and Aaby (2007), where it becomes evident that the unauthorized communities in the United States are facing greater obstacles in access to resources and readjust.

*“Low-income Latinos are often at particular risk following a disaster since they lack access to financial and material resources to recover their losses and cushion the impact of the disaster. Studies of earthquakes in California suggest that poor Latinos, undocumented immigrants, and monolingual ethnic groups are among the groups that encounter the most problems in acquiring resources and recovering”* (Carter-Pokras, et al., 2007: 466).

An analysis of the 1989 earthquake in Central California, showed that Mexican migrant workers without legal documentation, received less emergency recovery-resources compared to the general population, making them highly vulnerable to the damages caused by the earthquake despite the in-discriminatory effects of this natural disaster (Cannon, 1994: 26). Most Mexican migrant workers have less personal assets (i.e. property, savings accounts, insurance) they can rely on during times of emergencies and they have little options for housing, usually accepting temporary housing or opting for low-income housing, which are located in hazard prone areas. Additionally, most Mexican migrant workers did not have full legal status and therefore could not qualify for much of the emergency relief offered by the government (Bolin and Stanford, 1998: 23).

### **3.2.1 Fear of Undocumented Immigrants**

As previously mentioned, a constant fear of authorities and detention or even deportation exists in the minds of undocumented immigrants, which has led to their avoidance of official, governmental disaster assistance programs (e.g. at the Northridge Earthquake, CA 1994 or Hurricane Sandy 2012) (Bolin & Stanford, 1998 and Weerasinghe et al., 2015).

This fear of U.S. authorities among the undocumented community is found frequently in the literature. A study on undocumented immigrants during the man-made disaster

of 9/11 investigated the failure of giving national attention to the affected undocumented community who was also severely impacted. For instance, neither public recognition of undocumented immigrant victims on memorials exist, nor was monetary support and resources for remaining family members distributed. It became evident that the undocumented community first feared initial interaction with officials and authorities. Secondly, the complex bureaucracies of relief agencies, both governmental and nongovernmental, caused confusion to the undocumented community. The catastrophe then became associated with failed security and inadequate immigration policies, under which undocumented immigrants' situation became more precarious (Délano and Nienass, 2014).

Studies on unauthorized immigrants affected by Hurricane Sandy (2012) showed similar barriers. Again, fear among the undocumented populations and contradictory information from officials increased their vulnerability. In addition, the lack of sufficient access to mainstream communication channels and language barriers were limiting and, hence, worsened the situation for undocumented immigrants (Délano and Nienass, 2014 and Weerasinghe et al., 2015).

In general, how undocumented individuals and mixed-status families experience disasters is heavily influenced by this undocumented status, which, consequently impacts their access to relief services, emergency assistance and evacuations. Furthermore, the fear of authorities increases their vulnerability and inspires more heuristic actions during disasters, such as remaining in affected areas and not seeking official assistance (Weerasinghe et al., 2015).

Regardless of the type of disaster, it is amply suggested by the literature that the undocumented population faces additional hardship from not being recognized by the country as legal citizens. With this alienation comes neglect and the absence of most governmental aid. As Coutin (2007) describes, the space in which undocumented immigrants live is one in which they *“can be physically present but legally absent, existing in a space outside of society, a space of ‘nonexistence,’ a space that is not*



*actually 'elsewhere' or beyond borders but that is rather a hidden dimension of social reality"* (Coutin, 2007: 9). The undocumented community lives a life of inconspicuousness, they are physically present yet legally nonexistent, living on the margins of society.

In summary, the literature on undocumented communities in natural disasters in the United States is limited. However, social scientists have found that those communities were vulnerable before a natural disaster and became even more vulnerable after the disaster. In this regard, this study builds upon the previous research by exploring and analyzing the disproportionate effects on undocumented immigrants before, during and after the NorCal 2017 fire. This study implements a new perspective by analyzing the current Trump administration's anti-immigration approach through the perspective of Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics. The occurrence of the unfortunate NorCal 2017 fire and the polarized US political climate serve as a significant topic to better understand the undocumented community.

## **4. Theoretical Frameworks**

In the following chapter the theoretical frameworks of biopolitics/biopower and vulnerability studies are presented. Throughout the research process the chosen theoretical concepts were identified as the most appropriate and operative explanatory tools to comprehend the research results and discussions. Firstly, Michel Foucault's notion of biopolitics and biopower in the modern age are introduced; following this a definition and description of the concepts of vulnerability are given and are therewith related to society's resilience.

Further, the two theoretical concepts are utilized in chapter six, where they are interwoven into the context of undocumented immigrants' lives and applied to natural disasters' effects on undocumented persons.

### **4.1 The Concept of Biopolitics: The Right of Life and Death**

#### **4.1.1 Power of the Sovereign**

*“For a long time, one of the characteristic privileges of sovereign power was the right to decide life and death”* (Foucault, 1978: 135). Thus, it was in the hands of the sovereign to give life but to also take life in an *“absolute and unconditional way”* (Foucault, 1978: 135). However, according to Foucault, over time this form of pure and direct sovereign rule has decreased considerably and ceased to be the exclusive form of power. Instead, this supreme power transformed into having both an indirect as well as direct approach. In the case of an external threat or enemy, the sovereign indirectly controlled life and death by demanding his people to fight and defend the state. This effectively exposed the people to mortal danger in order to ensure the survival of the society as a whole. Similarly, direct power over life and death could be evoked when either the sovereign was directly threatened or the well-being of the state was endangered by the conscious or unconscious trespassing of laws (Foucault, 1978 and Apatinga, 2017). Foucault identified this power over life and death as a *“mechanism of deduction”* (Foucault 1978: 136), hence its utilization is ultimately

decided by the sovereign through direct and indirect power. However, as Foucault indicates the power over life and death is more profound and far-reaching in the latter. *“The sovereign exercised his right to life only by exercising his right to kill, or by refraining from killing; he evidenced his power over life only through the death he was capable of requiring. The right which was formulated as the ‘power of life and death’ was in reality the right to take life or let live”* (Foucault 1978: 136).

This mechanism of deduction, however, diminished in the West and is no longer the prevailing approach, but has rather undergone a drastic transformation and is now just one element of power among others. *“This death that was based on the right of the sovereign is now manifested as simply the reverse of the right of the social body to ensure, maintain, or develop its life. [...] But this formidable power of death [...] now presents itself as the counterpart of a power that exerts a positive influence on life, that endeavors to administer, optimize, and multiply it, subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations”* (Foucault, 1978: 136-137).

The ancient method of ruling accompanied by the power form of deduction was characterized as a submission: the people yielded to the sovereign, and the sovereign was protected through the mobilization of resources, land, and even the people’s lives. However, this old form of power then evolved into the defense of society’s existence. *“Wars are no longer waged in the name of a sovereign who must be defended; they are waged on behalf of the existence of everyone; entire populations are mobilized for the purpose of wholesale slaughter in the name of life necessity: massacres have become vital”* (Foucault, 1978: 137).

In this sense, Foucault underscores the sphere of power which expanded the delegation of power to the sovereign's subjects. This laid the foundation of a system that would further the reach of power – a political power which granted the governance of life. Hence, Foucault’s notion that modern politics has increasingly incorporated biopolitics does not imply that the sovereign and the power over death has vanished. It is important to note that the increased power within society did not diminish the power of the sovereign, rather it enhanced and justified the continuance of the sovereign's reign.

The professed defense and protection of society constituted the means and reasons for this continued growth of power. This concept can be further applied to the right of the sovereign to deploy resources intended to promote population growth. For instance, intentionally favoring societal rules that encourage family structures creates an environment supportive of maximum reproduction. On the other hand, the sovereign can also disallow reproduction by preventing such an environment from existing and, therefore, stifling the people's ability to reproduce (Lemke, 2011; Inda, 2002 and Apatinga, 2017).

#### 4.1.2 Technologies of Power

These newfound mechanisms of the sovereign's control - the power over life - were described by Foucault through his categorization of *anatomo politics of the human body* (the disciplining of the individual body) and *biopolitics of the population* (the regulatory control of the population) (Foucault, 1978: 139 and Lemke, 2011: 36).

Anatomo-politics of the human body emerged in the 17th century and operated at the micro level, with control focusing on disciplining the individual. Under this mechanism, the governing body of law regulates the individual like a cog in a machine to achieve conformity and maximize economic efficiency, which effectively contributes to the power of control (Foucault, 1978: 193). Within this definition, inputs and outputs are precisely controlled. Therefore, the rule of law's intention was to create a malleable population for the achievement of calculated outcomes. Moreover, the technology of discipline materialized within social institutions, specifically the military and schools. Its evolution differed from historical forms of control such as slavery and serfdom, which produced maximum economic production while simultaneously weakening the body (Lemke, 2011: 36).

In the 18th century, a second mechanism to harness power, the biopolitics of the population, emerged. This concept centered around biological processes including the “*propagation, births and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy and longevity,*

*with all the conditions that can cause these to vary*”(Foucault, 1978: 139). This technology of power is not targeted at the individual’s body, but rather *“the collective body of a population”* (Lemke, 2011: 36). Further, the term ‘population’ here is understood as an independent biological corpus - a social body. This social body is *“characterized by its own processes and phenomena, such as birth and death rates, health status, lifespan, and the production of wealth and its circulation. The totality of the concrete processes of life in a population is the target of a ‘technology of security’”*(Lemke, 2011: 36-37, Foucault, 2003: 249).

This evolution of power between the 17th and 18th century were both focused on the body: anatomo politics concerning the discipline of individual bodies and biopolitics fixating on life and biological processes, *“ [...] a technology which aims to establish a sort of homeostasis, not by training individuals, but by achieving an overall equilibrium that protects the security of the whole from internal dangers”* (Foucault, 2003: 249).

#### 4.1.3 The Biopolitical State

As time passed and society in the Western world progressed, Foucault observed that people began to consider and experience peripheral spheres of life more closely. People acknowledged *“hav[ing] a body, conditions of existence, probabilities of life, and individual and collective welfare”* (Foucault, 1978: 142). With this came the realization that these forces could be used as a new power tool for optimal modification (Foucault, 1978).

*“Power would no longer be dealing simply with legal subjects over whom the ultimate dominion was death, but with living beings, and the mastery it would be able to exercise over them would have to be applied at the level of life itself; it was the taking charge of life, more than the threat of death, that gave power its access even to the body”* (Foucault, 1978: 142-143). The new political power of the West allowed for the unprecedented, complex control the subject’s life. Power, once solely restricted to the decision over life or death, is today the power over life which seeks a predetermined

impact, takes charge of life and even accesses the biological body (Foucault, 1978 and Inda, 2002).

It is this sense of power over life that Foucault defines as biopower: where the *“biological existence”* became *“reflected in the political existence”* (Foucault, 1978: 142 and Inda, 2002: 101). Hence, the assumed role of the government is to oversee reproduction and manage a well-conditioned, productive population. Moreover, it is the government's highest concern to shield the life of its citizenry, *“that is, of the species body - the body that functions as the foothold of biological processes pertaining to birth, death, health, and longevity”* (Inda, 2002: 101). In this manner, the tactics of governmental control, the administration over subjects' bodies and the management of life in a modern state are representative of a biopolitical state.

As the modern biopolitical state stresses the protection and strengthening of its population, weakening or even removing those that constitute a threat to the state's well-being follows logically. The reasoning of biopolitics hence implies, *“that the death of the other, the death of those lives unworthy of being lived, will make life in general more healthy and pure”* (Inda, 2002: 102).

With this rationalization, Foucault argues that in protecting its population, the biopolitical state contributes, directly or indirectly, to the suppression of marginalized populations. In this regard, war is an extreme form of this rationalization, in which the mechanism of biopower serves as justification for the elimination of opposing entities, assuredly invoking and condoning racism. From the 19th century, wars became increasingly cruel and bloody, pursuing the elimination of internal enemies' lives. *“[...]never before did regimes visit such holocausts on their own populations. [...] It is as managers of life and survival, of bodies and the race, that so many regimes have been able to wage so many wars, causing so many men to be killed”* (Foucault, 1978: 136-137). There were many instances where biopower authorized the suppression and, in some cases, elimination of life, such as Nazi Germany's holocaust campaign against the Jews. However, war and death are not the only means to remove opposition. A more indirect method is to surround them in a sphere of higher vulnerability, which

amplifies their risk of eventual death through external threats, such as sickness or natural disasters.

In conclusion, the framework of Foucault's biopolitics and biopower indicates that in modern states, a distinction has been made between the people in the polity, where the certain groups' interests are voiced and protected, and the 'others' that are invisible and lacking representation. Additionally, biopower in modern states is typically not equivalent to eliminate a faction of society forcefully. Rather, the new mechanism that has surfaced is the denial of security and protection for a people. This marginalization from society translates into social death, which can eventually cause absolute mortality. Biopower implies the notion that there is a distinct divide between one group of people that will benefit and thrive versus another that will be excluded. Such is the case for the undocumented immigrants in the US that face exclusionary processes in qualifying for government support, especially in times of a disaster.

## **4.2 Vulnerability and Resilience**

### **4.2.1 Concept of Vulnerability**

In social science disaster research, the concept of vulnerability has shifted from being distinctly on preparedness and mitigation to contemporaneously include socio-economic factors. This research paper refers to the term *vulnerability* in the context of a natural disaster as:

*“[...]social and material conditions deriving from characteristics of individuals and groups that make them susceptible to harm and loss from environmental hazards and that constrain their ability to cope with the adversities of disasters”* (Bolin and Stanford, 1998: 22).

The central presumption that hazards are natural is appropriate; however, the varying effects on people depending on their socioeconomic conditions allows a hazard to evolve into a disaster.

Hence, the reduction of vulnerability through technical interventions for preparedness and mitigation among a society is paramount. Indeed, a society's social and economic systems interact with the level of preparedness and mitigation efforts to determine vulnerability. With regard to Cannon (1994), "*in order to understand the relationship between humans and nature, it is more important to discern how human systems themselves place people in relation to each other and to the environment than it is to interpret natural systems*" (Cannon, 1994: 15). Thus, the phenomenon of social stratification and the respective personal exposure to the effects of a disaster can be explained by the concept of vulnerability.

In the same way, Wisner et al., (2004) refine the definition of vulnerability to, "[...] *the characteristics of a person or group and their capacity to anticipate, cope with, resist and recover from the impact of a natural hazard. It involves a combination of factors that determine the degree to which someone's life, livelihood, property and other assets are put at risk by a discrete and identifiable event in nature and in society*" (Wisner, Blaikie, Cannon, & Davis, 2004: 11).

Hence, vulnerability can be described as a complex characteristic of individuals and groups who reside in a natural, social and economic space and, within which, are categorized as either more or less vulnerable in consonance to their individual position in society (Cannon, 1994). This leads to the assumption that the socioeconomic factors of an individual or a group constitute a pivotal role in the repercussions of a hazard. Factors such as social class, race and ethnicity, gender as well as age are decisive for differentiating vulnerabilities among the population (Fothergill and Peek, 2004 and Cannon, 1994). Predominantly, it is the most vulnerable people who are marginalized and excluded from specific procedures easily available to the most dominant classes and, accordingly, struggle to avoid, cope and recover from hazards equally. It emerges that an environmental hazard such as a flood, an earthquake, or a wildfire constitute the causation; however, the disaster that persists is strongly influenced by the underlying social, political, and economic dynamics of the local context. The consideration of differentiated vulnerability in natural disaster research allows for the



estimation of the disparity and process of marginalization in a given locality prior to an environmental hazard (Bolin and Stanford, 1998).

The following table taken from Cannon 1994 illustrates in detail the three varying degrees of vulnerability and their major determinants.

| <b>Type of Vulnerability</b>    | <b>Components</b>  | <b>Determinants</b>  |
|---------------------------------|--|--|
| <b>Livelihood Vulnerability</b> | Income opportunities<br>Livelihood type<br>Entry qualifications<br>Assets and savings<br>Health Status | Class position<br>Gender<br>Ethnicity<br>Age<br>Action of state  |
| <b>Self-Protection</b>          | Building quality<br>Hazard protection<br>Location of home/work   | <i>Socioeconomic factors as above and:</i><br>Technical ability or availability<br>Hazard specific: return period, intensity, magnitude  |
| <b>Social Protection</b>        | <i>As above and:</i><br>Building regulations<br>Technical intervention                                 | <i>As above and:</i><br>Level of scientific knowledge<br>Level (and characteristics) of technical practices<br>Type of science and engineering used by state and dominant groups |

(Cannon, 1994: 21)

Cannon stresses the fact that too often the most significant, underlying determinants of vulnerability, the social, economic and political factors, are hardly taken into consideration. Instead, emphasis is regularly placed on other aspects, such as decreasing the hazard's impact through technical preparedness, which have a rather minimal effect (Cannon, 1994).

An essential factor in measuring vulnerability is livelihood, which is defined as “[...] *the command of an individual, family, or other social group has over an income and/or bundles of resources that can be used or exchanged to satisfy its needs. This may involve information, cultural knowledge, social networks and legal rights as well as*

*tools, land or other physical resources*” (Wisner et al., 2004: 11). In other words, the more access a person has to resources, the less vulnerable they are to a natural disaster. In this regard, vulnerability analysis is essential in every country, developing or developed.

Lastly, one’s socioeconomic position is decisive for the degree of vulnerability she or he might face. Thus, poverty correlates with greater vulnerability, and hence can be determined as a factor that measures a current status, while vulnerability involves a predictive characteristic. A correlation between those two factors are given, yet it is not an absolute correlation (Cannon, 1994 and Cannon, Twigg, & Rowell, 2003).

#### 4.2.2 Concept of Resilience

Complimentary to the focus on the degree of vulnerability, disaster resilience must be included in the discussion, as it constitutes a pivotal area of this field of study. Van Zandt et al. (2014) express the opinion that communities in the United States are becoming increasingly vulnerable and, simultaneously, less resistant. In order to address this expanding vulnerability and ensure sustainability, the overall resilience of communities needs to be enhanced (Van Zandt et al., 2014: 24).

While vulnerability to natural disasters increases, recent studies of various disciplines have focused on the implementation of resilience in communities. The definition, however suggests that:

*“[...]resilience is the ability of a community and the biophysical systems upon which they depend, to:*

- *Resist or absorb the impact (deaths, damage, losses, etc.) of natural hazards;*
- *Rapidly recover from those impacts; and*
- *Reduce future vulnerabilities through adaptive strategies.”* (Van Zandt et al., 2014: 30).

Disaster resilience is arguably the most significant safeguard against natural disasters. It is essential for any affected community to be able to manage and recover from a disaster. Bolstering resilience to hazards can be achieved by improving access to social

protection (by government, institutions or civil society); strengthening people's efforts for self-protection (reinforcement of homes, workplace, etc.); and bettering their livelihoods and general well-being (health, nutrition, morale, etc.) (Cannon, Twigg, & Rowell, 2003: 5-6).

In summary, the vulnerability framework allows for the identification of a specific population or community's exposure level to a natural hazard according to their socioeconomic status. Additionally, the framework is able to quantify the community's resilience and ability to recover from a natural disaster because it is concerned with political and economic power, accessibility of resources, and the role of the government (Cannon, 1994: 28). As Cannon 1994 ends his intake to the human connection between a hazard and the disastrous outcome:

*“There is usually scope for something to be done within existing situations to reduce vulnerability and promote disaster mitigation. It is rare for governments to explicitly support the processes by which some people become more vulnerable than others [...]. In particular I would argue for the need to support and promote organizations of civil society which can provide hazard monitoring and the measurement and analysis of vulnerability, beyond the control of the state”* (Cannon, 1994: 28).

This framework is pivotal as the foundation for understanding undocumented immigrants' vulnerability and resilience as well as comprehending the subsequent impact of the NorCal Fire 2017.

## **5. Methodology**

### **5.1 Methodological Considerations and Approach**

In this chapter, the research methodology and the different approaches outlining the research progression will be discussed. This study involved a multi-step procedure including previous literature on undocumented immigrants and initial research on reports of the NorCal 2017 wildfire. Thereafter, experts familiar with the daily lives of undocumented immigrants affected by the fire were identified and interviewed. Finally, this paper ends with an analysis and discussion of the interview results.

The present thesis stresses the equally balanced presentation of results and discussion of (1) the day-to-day characteristics of undocumented immigrants and (2) how they were affected by the NorCal 2017 fire. The framework of biopolitics introduced by Michel Foucault, as well as the concepts of vulnerability and resilience provide guidance in comprehending and explaining the research findings.

These frameworks and tools were chosen because it became apparent during the interviews that the current political discourse coming from the White House drastically predetermined the undocumented immigrants' vulnerable status.

#### **5.1.1 The Expert Interview**

The expert interview's main interest is placed on a person's "*capacities as experts for a certain field of activity. They are integrated into the study not as a single case but as representing a group*" (Flick, 2014: 227). The selected experts for this study offer information about undocumented immigrants affected by the wildfire based on their professional knowledge and personal experiences. With this shared competency on the subject, the interviewees offer a specific function:

*Experts have technical process oriented and interpretive knowledge referring to their specific professional sphere of activity. Thus, expert knowledge does not only consist of systematized and reflexively accessible specialist knowledge, but it has the character of practical knowledge in big parts. Different and even*

*disparate precepts for activities and individual rules of decision, collective orientations and social interpretive patterns are part of it. [...] By becoming practically relevant, the experts' knowledge structures the practical conditions of other actors in their professional field in a substantial way* (Bogner and Menz, 2009: 19 in Flick, 2014: 228).

The identified experts for this research were persons who were intimately involved within the local community through their work with local non-governmental organizations (NGOs), community-based organizations (CBOs) or were employed by the local government. Hence, all experts have a common understanding of the specific context and lives of the undocumented community prior to, throughout, and in the aftermath of the fire. The experts are also knowledgeable on U.S. politics and the immigration issues surrounding the undocumented community. This paper considered interviewing undocumented immigrants, however, for a number of reasons the experts were more feasible to interview. During the writing of this paper the undocumented immigrants were preoccupied from recovering from the fires. Additionally, the language barrier between the undocumented immigrants and the author proved to be difficult to overcome.

Thus, the expert interview approach was deemed the best available option to comprehend the lives of undocumented immigrants in connection with the Northern California wildfire of 2017.

### **5.1.2 Sampling Procedure**

The interviews were comprised of eleven experts that were identified through online searches and recommendations from personal and professional contacts. The online research included a review of organizations that have spearheaded immigrant assistance initiatives. Further exploration involved city and county websites, as well as webpages of local CBOs and NGOs. At the time of the interviews, all experts were employed within or for a fire-affected municipality in Northern California. Initial outreach was conducted via email and phone calls, with response rates being higher

than expected. Further, the overall disposition of the experts was forthcoming: they were open to sharing their knowledge and personal opinions on the researched topic. Nearly all interviews were conducted with female experts; only one was held with a male. This gender discrepancy of interviewees was not intended; merely, the majority of discovered and available individuals were female. It was determined that the experts' knowledge, due to their personal and professional lives constituted a comprehensive and satisfactory review. Due to the topics' high level of sensitivity, the research refrains from offering personal identifiable details of the interviewees that could make them or their work and community engagement recognized.

### **5.1.3 Research Design**

A circular research design was applied in order to allow the participants to share their expert opinions as the interview discussion progressed and also to permit the research to comprehensively extract and record the information (Witt, 2001). This research strategy granted continuous flexibility and adaptation in decision-making throughout the research process. Beyond that, the present empirical research was led by an exploratory research design (Bogner and Menz, 2002: 37). The circular approach implies that a certain succession of research phases may be run several times. Each subsequent step is influenced by the results of the prior step (Witt, 2001). In the case of the present study, only a rough pre-understanding of the research topic was available; hence, the ability to plan subsequent research steps was limited. Decisions concerning research procedures, interview groups, data collection and data analysis were made throughout the research process, and were, thus, not precisely predetermined. Moreover, the design allowed for the modification of the research questions as more information about the differentiating factors that affected undocumented immigrants' lives was gained.

Further, a pretest was conducted in order to ensure that the interview guidelines prompted sufficient discussion, ultimately answering the research questions. This initial interview was used to identify gaps in content; modifications were then made.

#### 5.1.4 Data Analysis

In the course of data analysis, nine interviews were transcribed verbatim. The remaining two interviews were led without a recorder; instead, notes were taken during and immediately following the interview in order to accurately record and comprehend the statements made. Thus, purpose of the transcripts is to reproduce the spoken word and content-related representation. The analysis of the expert interviews was guided by Mayring's analytical approach for qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2008).

Due to personal preference, a qualitative data analyzing program was not used; this process was instead performed by hand with printed transcripts. Next, the transcripts were coded and categorized. With this, patterns were identified, and the text was separated and assigned to thematic focuses.

The semi-structured interview guideline was divided into the three levels; before, during, and after the disaster. Next, the codes were attributed between (1) before the disaster and (2) during and after the fire. Upon completion, nine categories were built: four categories reflecting pre-fire material, and five categories expressing information during the fire, as well as post-disaster.

As an example, *Category 1: Daily Life* (see chapter six) summarizes all the codes relating to day-to-day characteristics. These include the reasons why undocumented immigrants left their country of origin; the challenges they face in their everyday lives; the restrictive housing situations; the mixed-status of many families; the limited job opportunities; and the little income they have. These, and numerous other codes, were aggregated to develop the Daily Life category. The transcripts and assigned codes were continuously revised as the research progressed and new knowledge was found.

According to Mayring (2008) category creation consists of both inductive and deductive reasoning. The deductive element became apparent through the development of the interview guideline, where the preset categories of “before”, “during” and “after” the NorCal fire were incorporated. The guideline was, however, semi-structured, allowing for new ideas to be raised and discussed throughout the interviews. Additionally, inductive reasoning was employed in the creation of the categories derived from coded interview transcripts (Mayring, 2008: 74 and Ramsenthaler, 2013: 25).

## **5.2 Ethical Considerations**

The federal government has categorized undocumented immigrants as illegal aliens residing in the United States. As this act is unlawful and, therefore, punishable, every step of this research has been treated with sensitivity and confidentiality to protect the identity of the participants within this research paper. Ethical considerations were aligned with the American Sociological Association (ASA) code of ethics.

All involved participants in this study gave oral consent after having been informed of the research aim and the interview recording methods, as well as having been reassured that their names, localities, workplace, and organizations of engagement would not be named in the study. In this way, the anonymity of all interviewees was guaranteed. Moreover, in order to uphold transparency of this research, all interview transcripts are available upon request.

### **5.2.1 Reflexive Considerations**

At the time of the NorCal wildfire in the month of October 2017, I - the author of this paper - was residing within the fire-affected area. By being in the field while the wildfire continued to burn, I witnessed first-hand the severe impacts of its upheaval. In the aftermath, I assisted my former employer with the provision of communication support through translation services and production of a public service announcement



to be disbursed in the media. I, myself, experienced the insufficient communication of emergency information in the beginning of the disaster which was stressed multiple times in the expert interviews. Furthermore, I attended one of the first Spanish-led informational meetings in the first week of the fire. At this time, the deep and profound emotions felt by the community, especially the undocumented immigrants, during the ongoing disaster struck me. Only here did the attendees feel safe because it was held at a church, a place of trust and sanctuary, as I was told. The undocumented community was continuously reassured by a local sheriff that the local authorities could be trusted. The sheriff further insisted, attempting to dispel their palpable fears, that the officials would do their best to ensure their safety.

It was this situation that provided me with the inspiration to initiate, design and write this research paper.

## **6. Result Presentation and Discussion**

In this chapter the outcomes of this study are presented in two dimensions. The first dimension discusses the results of the characteristics of the lives of undocumented immigrants through the lens of Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics. The second dimension focuses on the impacts and effects of the NorCal fire 2017 on the Northern California undocumented community, using the concept of vulnerability and resilience as well as finds arguments through the perspective of the concept of biopolitics.

Both dimensions, separately outline in a first step the interview results and subsequently discuss them. The discussions take place through a combination of the interview results as well as the embedding into the selected theoretical frameworks and relevant literature.

### **6.1 Characteristics of the General Lives of Undocumented Immigrants**

Throughout the interviews different factors of daily life experiences of undocumented people were identified and led to the formation of the below illustrated categories. However, each category overlaps and influences the other; thus the themes are merely presented in a systematic, segregated order to better illustrate and explain the results.

#### *Category 1: Daily Life*

Experts generally identified the population of interest as an undocumented community yet also described them as part of the Northern California community. The various motives of moving to the United States are not particularly discussed; however, it was mentioned multiple times that they were seeking a better life and more opportunities, for themselves but especially for their children. Moreover, oftentimes other nuclear family members or closer relatives already reside in the United States, giving further reason for immigrating.

*"I ask - 'Why do you come?' And they just say, they already have someone here. They already knew someone, whether long distance relatives, brothers, aunts. For example, my parents moved to [California] years ago because we have two aunts here". (Interview\_5)*

*“...the majority of the people are just people that want to live and work and have better lives for their children”. (Interview\_3)*

Withal, this is directly linked to the housing situation of undocumented immigrants as well as mixed-status families. Mixed-status refers to those families who have US-born children and are hence automatically US citizens. One expert explains that a high percentage of the undocumented families are mixed-status. Due to the expensive housing market, especially in the Bay Area and its surroundings, several families often live together in a confined space.

As one interviewee illustrates, *“Well, the housing situation is difficult because if they come here usually they come here because they know someone whether it is a family member, friends or relatives. And usually they are living in the house where there is one or two of their families. So it is not only limited to where they have their own room it is usually that they are sharing part of the living-room to stay there, or they are sharing a room with like three other people. Because there is two to three families in a house. With the rents being so expensive here in the Bay Area I see it all the time. [...] They cannot afford to live on their own” (Interview\_6).*

Moreover, another expert explains that *“You have many of them that probably just have multiple families living in like a 2-bedroom apartment. Or they all just have barracks to live in at the farms they work at. Nothing super glamorous” (Interview\_7).*

As one of the experts indicates, knowing about the possibility of finding work in certain industries without obtaining legal status and without holding a personal social security number is an additional motive for them to come and stay in the US. However, as undocumented immigrants oftentimes have little to no proper education and are not familiar with the English language, their employment opportunities are limited. For example, day labor centers help undocumented individuals find temporary employment, as the name implies. They also set standards between the employer and

employee. In this respect, the exploitation of undocumented workers can be minimized through standard wages and other protections.

Regarding the question, if the employment of undocumented immigrants is legal, one explains *“There is nothing illegal about hiring a person to work for you for a day - you don’t have to report it to the IRS [Internal Revenue Service]. Yes, I think it is legal technically to hire - and all of our laws in this country protect workers whether they are documented or undocumented. They may not have access to things like unemployment [benefits] but you still are guaranteed all of the protection like overtime protection and breaks as citizen workers have”* (Interview\_9).

Another interviewee says, *“The employer policy is - if they don’t ask and don’t know, the employer can’t legally get in trouble for hiring illegal immigrants”* (Interview\_5).

Regarding job opportunities, many of them work in the construction, agriculture as well as the hospitality industry. They work as farm workers, housekeepers, gardeners and similar positions essential to the local wine industry.

Furthermore, the interviews show that the undocumented community constitutes one of the most vulnerable populations in the United States. *“[...] undocumented communities were in crisis before the fires. They were in job crisis, wage crisis, housing crisis [...]”* (Interview\_8). Yet, they are working jobs and pay into the system. *“They pay taxes, pay social security. I know men who have worked for 40 years in the US, paid into social security by using false SSN [social security number] and they will never collect benefits upon their retirements”* (Interview\_1).

In addition to these daily hardships, the federal government’s definition of ‘illegal aliens’ marginalizes them.

*“I know a family who just doesn’t go anywhere other than work and home, work and home. They are going to do whatever is possible to call less attention to oneself”* (Interview\_2).

In summary, this category identifies multiple aspects that are integral parts of an undocumented immigrant's everyday lives, including their opportunities and obstacles.

### *Category 2: Economic Contribution Value*

It appeared that the aggregated view of experts is that undocumented immigrants' contribution to the US economy is pivotal and indispensable. Contrary to these experts' prevailing standpoint, this topic is very controversial, with others in the US drastically opposing this viewpoint.

*“America would not be able to function without undocumented immigrants' labor. They are basically doing the jobs, quote unquote, 'typical Americans' don't want to do. And there is no way that specifically California's economy would be able to function without undocumented immigrants doing what they do” (Interview\_5).*

The economic contributions of the undocumented immigrants were highlighted repeatedly as tasks no one else wants to do. Moreover, experts collectively reported that the labor force of undocumented immigrants is mostly centered in the agricultural, construction and hospitality industries.

*“That is the backbone of our country. You know, if the majority of undocumented families work in the hospitality industry, in restaurants, in hotels, definitely in the agriculture bringing in our foods and so on - if folks did not work in those places things would come to a halt” (Interview\_2).*

In general, the job opportunities for undocumented immigrants are restricted and usually entail minimum wage, despite efforts by organizations to mediate between employers and the workers. Despite the limited scope of opportunities, the employment of undocumented immigrants is pervasive.

*“The wage in Oakland for example is \$ 12.11/hour. I did some consulting for a restaurant group and a lot of the people that worked there were undocumented - and the different industries - whether it was an ice cream shop that they owned or one of the big restaurants in the city, or the nightclub industry as well - the janitorial staff that cleaned up were undocumented” (Interview\_6).*

This category characterizes the experts' existing knowledge about the contribution of undocumented workers to the economy. Job opportunities are limited and bring low wages, yet undocumented immigrants are an essential workforce in California, which has been a controversial topic in the United States and is directly linked to the category Political Level.

### *Category 3: Safety Perception*

Within the discourse of the interviews it was apparent that one of the most defining aspects of undocumented immigrants' life is the omnipresent fear of officials and authorities. Moreover, in close connection hereby stands the political discourse of the current White House administration. While this category specifically illustrates the results of safety perception in daily life of undocumented immigrants, the safety perception in regards to the NorCal fire is displayed in the second dimension of the paper's analysis.

Undocumented immigrants continuously live with the knowledge that, in principle, they can be deported at any time. Additionally, the current Trump administration heightens this fear by targeting especially Latino immigrants in many different ways. Experts explain, for instance, that they became a specific target in the political discourse of anti-immigration actions.

*“Like you see it in my husband’s family, there is some people that – avoid going to places. Like for example his cousins used to go to Disneyland a lot or they used to simply come up here to the city. But they don’t do it anymore because of that fear of being picked up by ICE” (Interview\_6)*

*“It is a lot of fear among the undocumented immigrant community especially in the age of Trump. Considering, they view everything with suspicion if there is any need for aid, they don’t necessarily know where to go or whom to trust. Because they are scared of deportation” (Interview\_7).*

Undocumented immigrants are afraid of Immigration Customs Enforcement (ICE) but also fearful of the state and local government. Undocumented immigrants fear anything and anybody in connection with the government and, therefore, the law.

The interviews outlined a predominant picture of fear among the undocumented community is ubiquitous and influences their daily lives. Many people second-guess attending public events or traveling because the fear of deportation and, consequently, family separation.

*“Because people are terrified and they are afraid to leave their homes, afraid to be in the community, afraid about who they can talk to because of the constant immigration enforcement by the federal government” (Interview\_1).*

Lastly, the experts discussed California’s sanctuary state status, however, admitted that the status was limited in its ability to protect undocumented immigrants, implying the state bill had some positive impact, but still inadequate.

*“Our law enforcement doesn’t get involved in deportations or arresting for that, but we are a sanctuary state now” (Interview\_3).*

#### **Category 4: Political Level**

This category discusses issues related to the current US politics. The present political climate encompasses the most crucially influential and overlapping category. Again, by residing in the country without legal permission any person is in perpetual conflict with the US federal law. Federal laws, however, differentiate in many regards from state laws causing discrepancies which also have a direct impact on undocumented immigrant issues, especially in California. Thus, the current US political climate is one of a polarizing political conflict and may be characterized as a ripple of immigration issues in the United States.

The experts discuss the political climate as a situation that creates *“more fear in an already fearful situation for people who are undocumented” (Interview\_9)*. Moreover, the White House portrays a pervasively negative picture of immigrants in general and

undocumented immigrants specifically. Additionally, as one of the experts highlights, the administration especially targets Latino (undocumented) immigrants.

*“Saying Mexicans are rapist and drug dealers, etc. everyone said the worst. They highlight the worst people but the majority of the people are just people that want to live and work and have better lives for their children [...]. One of the things is that undocumented immigrants come from all kinds of countries and look different everywhere. But the ones they focus on are brown and come from Central, South America - those are the main focus but there is immigrants from all countries” (Interview\_3).*

The discourse from the federal government perpetually threatens and intimidates the undocumented community. However, the state of California is generally more supportive of undocumented immigrants, as the enactment of the sanctuary state bill (Senate Bill 54) in January 2018 shows.

*“Last year we passed SB54 a sanctuary bill that protects more people from going to detention centers and provides more protection for undocumented immigrants in immigration detention centers and we are being sued by the federal government” (Interview\_8).*

*“So California has passed a lot of protection, a lot of local laws to protect immigrants. There is at least six new laws that protect immigrants in different aspects of their lives [...]. California is protecting people here and then Trump the president is suing California for trying doing that” (Interview\_5).*

The current lawsuits of the White House and the state of California are mentioned by most experts and hence highlights the tremendously diverging political discourses on the federal and state level.



## 6.2 Discussion of Results: General Life Characteristics

This first discussion characterizes the daily lives of undocumented immigrants in California, especially those living in the fire affected locations. Particularly this section aims to answer the following research question as stated in the introduction:

*(1) How can the undocumented immigrants' daily challenges be comprehended given the backdrop of the current US political climate through the framework of biopolitics?*

Through the lens of the aforementioned categories the undocumented immigrant's uncertain legal right to be in the US has impacted them more than any other factor. With this in mind, there were three key findings that answer the research question which will be discussed in detail further down: (1) As a consequence of intertwined social-political factors, the socioeconomic position of undocumented immigrants was identified as a predetermined factor that gives little to no room to improve their social position. In regards thereof, they are constituted as one of the most vulnerable population<sup>6</sup>. Undocumented immigrants face numerous financial constraints, including limited opportunities for employment and thus a non-existent financial safety net. Without a reliable source of income, they face multiple financial issues including limited housing options. (2) Furthermore, undocumented immigrants live in the US under a shroud of constant fear of being caught by ICE, deported and consequently suffer from family separation. (3) Lastly, it becomes apparent that the opposing discourse between the current White House administration and the sanctuary state of California has caused confusion and distrust with any government authority.

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<sup>6</sup> Their increased vulnerability in regards to the NorCal Fire 2017 is in particular discussed in chapter 6.4.

### 6.2.1 Determining Status of Illegality

Foundational to the plight of the undocumented immigrants is the omnipresent anti-migration discourse voiced by the Trump Administration. Coutin's (2007) explanation of the life of the undocumented immigrant, "*physically present but legally absent, existing in a space outside of society, a space of 'nonexistence,' a space that is not actually 'elsewhere' or beyond borders but that is rather a hidden dimension of social reality*" (Coutin, 2007: 9), precisely illustrates their situation: undocumented immigrants are defined as illegal aliens by the US federal government, yet are physically there but still invisible. Arguably then, it is the political dominance of the federal government that heavily influences the quality of life of the undocumented community. The reasoning thereof can be found in the anti-immigration policies, analyzed through the perspective of biopolitics.

### 6.2.2 Undocumented Immigrants as Threat to the Nation

Donald Trump's presidential campaign emphasized the implementation of stricter anti-immigration policies, which he believed would improve the prosperity of the country while increasing the nation's security by shifting resources away from undocumented immigrants. As seen by his victory, his rhetoric resonated with many US citizens. Thus, the biopolitical logic of the administration can be found in identifying undocumented immigrants as a threat to the country's welfare. In this regard, Trump promised during his US electoral campaign to build a wall in order to keep the immigrants out and threatened to immediately deport them if they illegally entered the US.

*"When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best [...] They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people [...] Mexico is ripping off the US more than almost any other nation [...] Mexico continues to make billions on not only our bad trade deals but also relies heavily on the billions of dollars in remittances sent from illegal immigrants in the United States [...] Under my administration anyone who illegally crosses the border will be detained until they are removed*

*out of our country and back to the country from which they came” (US President Trump during electoral campaign) (Graham and Midgley, 2017).*

In terms of Foucault's understanding of biopolitics, the biopolitical state seeks in its rationalization to weaken or even remove the ones that constitute a threat to the state's welfare, as exemplified by the federal government's actions against the threat posed by undocumented immigrants. According to Trump, *“they are pariahs, criminals who menace American neighborhoods, take American jobs, sap American resources and exploit American generosity: They are people who should be, and will be, expelled”* (Yee, Davis, & Patel, 2017).

The experts' observation pointed out that the White House under the Trump administration has exhibited a xenophobic political position: it constructs the undocumented immigrants as a social body of indignity that creates insecurity in the nation. Thus, the country's primary concern is to secure the lives of its people from the adversary. That power over life is what Foucault characterizes as biopower – the biological existence is now reflected in the current political arena.

The juxtaposition between the normal and abnormal, the good and the bad and the distinction between citizenship and non-citizenship is highlighted and stressed. *“The illegality of deportable aliens is the necessary counterpart (and ‘outside’) to the legality of U.S. citizens. [...] deportable aliens, who are the very essence of illegality, are created by law. [...] Their legal identities are no longer disembodied but rather materialized through their removal, first to a detention center and then through deportation itself”* (Coutin, 2007: 26). In this regard, it is the government that defines the body as illegal, creates the status of illegality and subsequently, identifies them as a threat to their nation's welfare.

Furthermore, the federal government portrays undocumented immigrants as accountable for social problems and hence produces and perpetuates this negative image. It constructed the body as a population that needs to be banned – as stated in Trump's controversial campaign slogan of ‘Make America Great Again’. Incidentally,

not only does this apply to undocumented immigrants but also other immigrants identified as threat to the nation's welfare and security<sup>7</sup>.

It is this distinct power of the government, "*a power that exerts a positive influence on life, that endeavors to administer, optimize, and multiply it, subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations*" (Foucault, 1978: 136-137), and the calculated tactics by the biopower that attempts to justify the marginalization of this specific population. A further justification for their marginalization, is that their illegality, ultimately denies their protection (which will be discussed in regards to the NorCal Fire 2017). In this understanding it is "*that the death of the other, the death of those lives unworthy of being lives, will make life in general more healthy and pure*" (Inda, 2002: 102). This does not imply that the government wants them to be killed, rather it promotes actions against the undocumented community through the denial of healthcare, access to education and financial aid, as well as potentiality of detention or deportation, which ultimately increases undocumented immigrants' vulnerability.

The Trump Administration identifies them as an acute threat to the nation and seeks avenues to eliminate and exclude the estimated 11.1 million undocumented immigrants and also deter future undocumented immigrants.

#### *(1) Impact on Socioeconomic Position*

The undocumented immigrants' status of illegality accompanied by the negative image of causing the nation's social problems as portrayed by the Trump administration has a direct impact on the socioeconomic position of undocumented immigrants and thus traps them in a rather hopeless situation during this government term. This is best exemplified through their limitation of job opportunities, which consequently affects their income and housing options.

Their employment options have been confined to a few industries in California, which include farm work, housekeeping, gardening, janitorial services, and construction.

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<sup>7</sup> For instance the 'Muslim ban' in January 2017.

These are often identified as jobs which are not desired by citizens, so they are conducted by undocumented immigrants. Not applicable in all situations, it may be the case that these jobs do not require documentation. Higher paying jobs like banking, teaching, and jobs in the technology industry require documentation for background checks, which requires documentation, because of the handling of sensitive data. Thus, in addition to their educational background the illusive legal status has significantly limited their job opportunities.

Organizations in Northern California have been helping the undocumented immigrants find employment and provide guidance and fair practices. Despite the effort to support them, they are arguably contributing to a perpetuating cycle confining them to the aforementioned industries. In this sense this support does not appear to address the root issues. However, this paper does not argue that the organization's efforts should cease, but instead highlights a supplementary underlying cause. The experts emphasized the ongoing conflict stemming from local organizations for an improvement of the lives of undocumented immigrants by advocating for social policy changes as exemplified by the introduction of SB54.

Without documentation or support from the state (federal government) the undocumented immigrants will continue to be confined to this socioeconomic level with little opportunity to climb the socioeconomic ladder. The underlying ground for the limitation of improvement is thus found in their captivating position of illegality, or as (Coutin, 2007: 9) implies, the "*hidden dimension of social reality*", where it allows them to work and have an income even though they are legally not allowed to reside in the country. In other words, the social reality is that undocumented immigrants are physically present, working, although it is grounded in illegality. Based on the experts' interviews, the undocumented immigrants are a significant workforce to the California economy and despite, the multiple challenges and the limited employment options, more than half of the undocumented immigrants are employed some of which are paying into a welfare system (i.e. taxes) that they will never benefit.

(2) Omnipresent Fear of Deportation

One of the experts described the increased fear of the undocumented immigrants by how they were too afraid to go to Disneyland since Trump's inauguration. While going to Disneyland might seem insignificant, the deeper insight here is that undocumented immigrants are increasingly afraid to attend social gatherings that may be beneficial for them. In this sense, the omnipresent fear is a significant daily life determining factor. Whether it is job fairs, networking events, or attending schools that would help them improve their skill sets or language proficiency, they are limited because they are too afraid to participate in these institutions. Moreover, it produces limited social contact and forces their social reality into a *hidden dimension*. Also, the previous research identified that the fear of government authority is a significant influential factor, but also in the occurrence of natural disasters.

Argumentatively, through the perspective of the biopolitics, the government uses this feeling of fear as a tool to maintain power. This feeling of constant fear is established by the federal government's watchful eye and reach. In the words of the rationalization, the modern biopolitical state is maintained through the ubiquitous threat of the government by weakening the opposition. In this way, the fear is deliberately produced and used as a tool over the bodies of the undocumented who are captives in the gray zone of illegality, and have limited options to improve from this stage. Thus, it is the biopolitical state's tactic of this instrument of power to manufacture fear among undocumented immigrants, to remind them that they are residing on illegal grounds and produce a deterrent for future undocumented immigrants. In this way, it reaffirms the mechanism of protecting the composite body, the lawful citizens and rightfully allows the others be disposed "*in the name of life necessity*" (Foucault, 1978: 137).

### (3) The Federal Government and the State of California

Currently, the White House administration has continuously targeted the undocumented immigrants and publicly accuses them as a threat to the nation's welfare, while the state of California voices a contrasting political discourse. However, in the 1990s California had a different mindset, and voted in favor of Proposition 187, although never implemented, it voiced sentiment against undocumented immigrants. The arguments were made on the premise that undocumented immigrants caused financial stress and subsequently negatively impacted the state's prosperity. Moreover, voters stressed that California should not be carrying the responsibility of undocumented immigrants, but rather secure the benefits and welfare of citizens and legal immigrants (Apatinga, 2017).

Hardly 20 years had passed since the debate over Proposition 187, and the pendulum has swung in favor of undocumented immigrants in California. In opposition, today the state of California has taken a firm stance against the federal government's viewpoints of undocumented immigrants. For example, the legislation SB54 prevents the cooperation between California law enforcement agencies and federal enforcement agencies. This is one instance where federal authority supersedes the state authority, surfacing the friction between the political discourse between the federal and the state governments, and highlighting each level of government's self-interests. Furthermore, the US elected Trump as president, however, California voted in favor of Hillary Clinton for the US Presidency<sup>8</sup> which is no surprise why California's self-interests differ from the federal government.

However, one must question, why is California motivated to support undocumented immigrants? Then conversely, what are the motives for the federal government to threaten undocumented immigrants? Although the scope of this thesis does not include a deep analysis, one can assume the motives are related to the economy. These

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<sup>8</sup> Official 2016 Presidential General Election Results (2017).

similarities between the 1990s and the current period paint the immigrant population as a significant threat to the nation by exploiting the welfare system which many believe should only benefit its citizens. This highlights the complexity of the issue for the undocumented immigrants, who are only spectators with limited power to voice their case.

In conclusion, the undocumented immigrants' lives can be characterized as being perpetually in a grey zone, meaning that their legitimate status hangs on the policy of seat of power. The legality (fate) of the undocumented immigrants has shifted back and forth, causing confusion and discourse between the different levels of government in the US. Currently, California has proclaimed itself as a sanctuary state for immigrants which opposes the current federal government under President Trump. However, this was not the case in the 1990's, when California approved (but never implemented) legislation in against support for undocumented immigrants. Therefore it is understandable, why undocumented immigrants have a distrust of any government, especially since, the application status to achieve legal status in the US can take multiple years, thus spanning multiple cycles of government authorities.



### **6.3 Impact and Effects of the NorCal Fire 2017 on Undocumented Immigrants**

The following categories are key elements which outline the undocumented immigrants' experience and perception of the NorCal fire 2017. Similar to and inclusive of the previous categories (1 to 4), the following categories interconnect and are mutually supportive. Again, following the illustration of the categories the crucial outcomes are discussed and seek to answer the proposed research questions.

#### *Category 5: Accessibility to Information*

Firstly, the interviewees described the chaos across the burning counties during the preliminary days of the fire. More precisely, official emergency communication to the public was described as non-existent or incomplete. Thus, some victims had no warning and only escaped when they saw the fire, fleeing their homes in the middle of the night with such urgency that all possessions were left behind.

*“People were being evacuated and running out of their homes at two in the morning. And you know, in the midst of this crisis not knowing where the fire would go next” (Interview\_8).*

The experts reported that many undocumented immigrants did not know where to go and whom to turn to once they evacuated their homes. Even though shelters and emergency-supply distribution centers had been established near fire-affected areas, many undocumented immigrants were reluctant to approach them because some were asking for identification.

*“there is two things, one, people not knowing that there were shelters and the second one, when people did go into the shelters they were asking for documentation” (Interview\_2).*

*“[...] a handful of undocumented people had really bad experiences at the shelters. [...] they were asked for their ID, told them they could not be there or they were ignored because nobody could speak Spanish. [...] or they were told that they could have no access to any of the donations” (Interview\_8).*

It must be noted that these scenarios were extreme cases and not experienced by all victims.

The experts stated that information was not clearly communicated and, initially, only communicated in English. Individual people, NGOs, and CBOs noticed this language barrier and took it upon themselves to translate official information especially into Spanish. Further, these bodies organized meetings to disseminate vital information in Spanish. However, one expert indicated that attendance was quite low at a meeting she helped host.

*“[...] our officials did not do a really good job because the fire happened so quickly. So the undocumented community didn't have much information, especially in Spanish” (Interview\_5).*

*“[...] information was not being given directly to the Spanish-speaking population. It was left up to people like us, people in the community that tried to do what we can - to get to the Spanish radio stations - trying to give information” (Interview\_3).*

Furthermore, it is emphasized that many undocumented immigrants rely upon oral communication from their church and family members, both of which they greatly trust, in order to obtain information.

*“Many families did not know what was taking place until a family member called them” (Interview\_2).*

In summary, whilst the wildfire spread rapidly across counties, emergency information was not clearly communicated to all affected communities, nor made immediately available in the necessary language.

### *Category 6: Accessibility to Monetary Aid*

As explained by an expert, first responders cannot deny any victim emergency aid, nor can anyone request legal documents during an emergency. Moreover, non-monetary first aid like shelters, blankets, food, and water were available to all victims during the crisis. In terms of access to other resources, however, it became clear during the course of the interviews that undocumented immigrants post-disaster were limited to private funds and family support. Monetary relief specifically becomes a complicated issue. Generally speaking, the experts insisted that no federal aid initiatives exist for undocumented immigrants. Yet they also indicated that this information was not exactly clear. For instance, one expert commented on the availability of federal funds for undocumented immigrant victims saying,

*“I don’t believe so. I don’t believe there ever is federal help for undocumented folks. I know that there is an organization called [organization named] and they are handling money that came from the state and I believe there were state funds to assist people and then the rest of it is private money and foundation money” (Interview\_9).*

Another expert similarly answered, *“I don’t believe so. Because again, you have to have that documentation” (Interview\_4).*

The federal government organization FEMA provides monetary assistance to citizens and also the children of undocumented immigrants. Being born in the country, these children reside legally in the US. However, FEMA monetary aid requires applicants to share their household information, which may include undocumented family members. Fearing that the federal government could intercept that information and deport them, mixed-status families are reluctant to apply with FEMA.

*“[...] there are some organizations that are drawing money from the state and there are some people who qualify for it but there is many people who do not qualify for anything. [...] people do not qualify for aid if they are noncitizens” (Interview\_1).*

It is highlighted multiple times that local organizations and attentive citizens were aware of undocumented immigrants' prevailing fear but also noticed that the official dissemination of information was not supportive enough, especially for the undocumented community. Accordingly, they reached out to the community as quickly as possible, offering their support and available resources. Some of the experts went to the shelters, and others organized informational meetings with various agencies to help improve the public's access to information.

*“That is why the [organization named] has been so significant. Because it is the place people can get any kind of aid and it is very small. You know, people are receiving between \$2,500 and \$3,000 if their house burned down. They'll probably receive a second check, but it is very small compared to the help citizens receive” (Interview\_1).*

In short, immediate emergency aid is provided to everyone regardless of their legal status. However, in the aftermath of the fire there is a great distinction between the resources available to citizens and to undocumented immigrants. It is apparent that undocumented immigrants are both reluctant to seek and discouraged from pursuing monetary aid provided by the US government. But, in some cases, immigrants have access to state funds through organizations. This leads to the conclusion that the monetary aid available to undocumented immigrants is mainly derived from their private funds and social networks.

#### **Category 7: Safety Perception – Disaster**

Firstly, as explained in 6.1, the daily life characteristics of undocumented immigrants is often heavily influenced by the fear of detention, deportation and consequently family separation. This fear of government authorities was reflected in both the reluctance to visit emergency shelters and the common decision to flee to coastal areas or to family and friends in other counties or even in different parts of the country.

*“There was a lot of fear in the community. Because even though that they were opening shelters when the fires happened - a lot of communities were afraid of the*

*shelters due to the law enforcement and they were afraid ICE was going to come to the shelters. Many of the immigrant families went to the ocean. Just went out in the open, to the ocean and slept at the beaches to just be away where they felt safer. They felt that they were safer there instead of being a part of the organized system” (Interview\_3).*

*“And a lot of undocumented have that fear of anyone that looks like an ICE agent. Then so, a lot of people were nervous and that they were gonna ask for their legal status and then they were gonna get you in trouble if you hadn’t legal status. They were not asking for legal status, but the rumors flew quickly as soon as someone saw like a national guard stationed there” (Interview\_5).*

This overwhelming fear during the NorCal 2017 fire is apparent in three ways. Firstly, some undocumented immigrants who knew of the shelters were too afraid to use them because they feared the possible consequences of encountering authorities there. The omnipresent fear of any authority, whether it is local, state or federal officials is decisive for the decision to avoid shelters or other help centers. However, the worst case was the undocumented immigrants’ fear of especially ICE taking advantage of an emergency situation and raiding the ad-hoc emergency shelters. Secondly, some undocumented immigrants had bad experiences themselves at the shelters, which led to others not coming into the shelters and they stayed on the parking lot outside of the building, went to the coast or sought safety elsewhere. Thirdly, unverified rumors about identification checks at shelters, ICE being present at shelters, spread quickly and increased the fear of undocumented immigrants.

In summary, the prevailing fear of authorities and official institutions is identified as a tremendous additional obstacle for undocumented persons in times of disaster. Moreover, as this fear is omnipresent, it is also carried into the process of recovery. This is exemplified through the provision of relief through FEMA, which bares the fear of data sharing of undocumented relatives.

### **Category 8: Direct Effects & Consequential Improvements**

Firstly, the direct impacts of the fire can be seen in the occupational and housing situation of the undocumented community. Many immigrants who had found work in the agricultural, construction and service sectors lost their jobs in the fire's destruction: from farm workers at wineries whose vineyards were scorched to housekeepers and gardeners in neighborhoods that burned. Additionally, those who lost their own homes, or were otherwise heavily affected and had to evacuate, could not adequately perform at work. Consequently, such individuals failed to earn any money at all, or at the very least faced a decreased income due to lost working days. And as mentioned before, undocumented immigrants do not qualify for unemployment.

To this effect, an expert implied, *“there is still a lot of people who are out of work. [...] landscapers and housekeepers that had been affected the most, because again those were people who are often getting paid under the table and not necessarily have documentation to prove income”* (Interview\_4).

One expert highlights a *“second wave of undocumented people being impacted”*. While some of the undocumented did not lose their homes originally due to the fire, they lost it in a later stage because of the landlord's personal need.

*[...] that impacted undocumented immigrants more than anyone”*. Moreover, *“that for our fire clean-up and now for the rebuild we have hundreds of contractors some of which are unlicensed and not providing adequate safety training or safety gear to the workers [...] specifically target[ing] undocumented immigrants for the cheap labor [...] knowing that [they] will take riskier working conditions”* (Interview\_8).

The experts generally identify the undocumented community as very resilient; however, returning to their pre-fire status quo is very hard to accomplish. One interviewee's comments depict a positive, optimistic approach to the rebuilding process in the communities,

*“I know that our immigrants are very resilient [...] and I think that they help one another when times are hard like right now. And as jobs come up [...] there would be some ways for them to kinda re-engage in the community. [...] There could be work for people that other people don't want to do”* (Interview\_3).

Contrary to this, is the aforementioned possible exploitation of the undocumented workers in the rebuilding process.

Moreover, the prevailing opinion of the experts implies that the community can learn from, and thus, improve from this terrible experience. The experts highlighted that multiple actions are taken at the community and state level in order to improve strategies for when the next disaster strikes.

*“[...] so as a nonprofit we are better equipped to handle the next disaster [...] people in the community [...] are better informed, they now know what to do if there is a disaster. They know what the government’s role is, our role - the nonprofit’s [...]. We are prepared for the next one because of this terrible experience” (Interview\_5).*

*“I think it is totally understandable that some things slipped through, but we need to make sure that those sort of things that had a detrimental impact on already the most vulnerable people improve” (Interview\_8).*

In sum, the fire has had a direct life-changing impact on the affected undocumented community. The situation in the aftermath of the fire may be positive in the sense that undocumented workers can find jobs in the rebuilding process. At the same time, they may be taken advantage of, as contractors are keenly aware of their need for employment to rebuild their own lives.

#### **Category 9: Political Level**

In the course of the interviews it became apparent that there is a significant difference in the aid provided by the federal government and the state government. On the one hand the federal government denies any direct monetary aid to undocumented immigrants, but on the other hand, the state government provides funds to local NGOs supporting, among others, the unauthorized community (e.g. California Human Development).

*“The current administration hasn’t taken any responsibility for undocumented immigrants” (Interview\_7).*

*“California is protecting people here and then Trump, the presidency is suing California for doing that. And so yes, there is a complete separation. So people know that President Trump and the administration is out to get people. It is not pro immigrants” (Interview\_5).*

The experts highlighted that anti-immigration laws were not overseen during the crisis. In this sense, no official agreements between the federal government and local government were made, such as prohibiting ICE from operating at shelters. Moreover, FEMA did not communicate upfront that all data collected would be automatically shared with the Department of Homeland Security.

*“[...]we never ever gotten assurance from FEMA that there would not be data sharing” (Interview\_9).*

Because of this unspecified detail, some community helpers initially even suggested that eligible persons with mixed-status families apply for FEMA funds.

*“Trump made it a very specific target of undocumented immigrants during both our fire and other natural disasters like the flooding that happened in Houston. [...] Trump enacted during our fire that there is nothing that prevented Homeland Security from requesting information from FEMA about who was receiving their services. And that is a direct attack” (Interview\_8).*

Hence, the distinction between the interest of the federal government and that of the state of California in the management and support of undocumented immigrants is pronounced and easily identifiable.



## 6.4 Discussion of Results: Impact and Effects

The NorCal 2017 fire constitutes a major natural disaster that affected many communities, some greater than others. While the ignition of the fire and subsequent environmental factors may have been random, the effects on the surrounding community was not. Hence, it can be argued that the local undocumented community is affected in a significantly way than the rest of the involved population. As introduced in the beginning of this paper, this discussion seeks to answer the following research questions:

*(2) How has the NorCal 2017 fire affected the vulnerability and resilience of the local undocumented community?*

*(3) Given the exclusion of undocumented immigrants from disaster funds, how can the intentions of the current White House administration be explained using the concept of biopolitics?*

In connection with the discussion of the undocumented immigrant's daily life characteristics and through the concept of biopolitics, the following key findings from the NorCal fire's impact on their vulnerability and resilience provides answers to the research questions.

Firstly, the (1) high degree of vulnerability of the affected undocumented community in the 2017 NorCal fire is predetermined by undocumented persons' constrained mobility within their socio-political status due to their unauthorized status. In this regard, undocumented immigrants have far fewer resources to cope with the disaster than other residents. Secondly, undocumented immigrants have (2) negligible resilience to disasters because of the social-political system's structure. Resource support is provided by family and friends, as well as local organizations. The (3) information sources in the emergency are mainly retrieved from their 'strong ties' because they are lacking 'weak ties'; which contributes to their high vulnerability and low resilience. Moreover, while the rebuilding process offers jobs to undocumented

immigrants, it also creates a (4) vicious cycle in which they are taken advantage of and have little resources to escape it. This highlights the significant need for policy change in order to improve inclusivity of the undocumented community and, consequently, mitigate their vulnerability.

Finally, through the concept of biopolitics, the denial of federal funds for undocumented immigrants can be justified in the act of weakening the ‘differentiated’ in order to assure the well-being of the ‘undifferentiated’.

#### 6.4.1 Vulnerability and Resilience

As outlined in the characteristics of the day-to-day lives of the undocumented immigrants, their socioeconomic position can be directly related to the lawfully constituted status of illegality, causing tremendous harm. Their life in a form of nonexistence holds them constrained in *“a twilight zone-like other dimension, alongside, but in certain key respects entirely apart from, other residents”*. They are captivated in *“a hidden dimension of social reality”* (Coutin, 2007: 26) and face greater hardship than others affected by the fire. The degree of vulnerability within the undocumented community is determined by the prevailing social, economic and political structures.

##### (1) Vulnerability

In accordance with the definition of vulnerability, it is the *“social and material conditions deriving from characteristics of individuals and groups that make them susceptible to harm and loss from environmental hazards and that constrain their ability to cope with the adversities of disasters”* (Bolin and Stanford, 1998:22). On the basis of Cannon’s (1994) types of vulnerability in regards to a natural disaster, the affected undocumented community’s degree of vulnerability can be examined.

The (1) *livelihood vulnerability* is characterized by the day-to-day limits experienced. Compared to citizens, the undocumented community faces greater limitations to

improving their livelihood. For instance, income opportunities are limited and health status is influenced by the marginal health care they receive. Possible determinants of this vulnerability, therefore, are class position or ethnicity. Also, by lawfully enforcing illegal status, the state plays a significant role in undocumented immigrants' livelihood vulnerability. Secondly, (2) *self-protection* implements the possible opportunities of protecting oneself from the effects of a disaster with factors such as the location of the home or work, the quality of the building one lives in or the action one can take to improve the hazard protection. In regards thereof, the socioeconomic status of undocumented immigrants heavily influences their ability to access and utilize self-protection; furthermore, access to an enhanced technology of their home's hazard protection is severely disadvantaged. Lastly, (3) *social protection* includes the components and determinants of the first two types of vulnerability, and additionally building regulations and technical interventions to which one can have access. Moreover, the determinants here are produced by the level of scientific knowledge as well as the type of engineering used by the state. The issue undocumented immigrants face in terms of social protection can be found in their housing situation. If the house they are renting is lacking certain types of legal regulations which would improve the hazard protection (e.g. fire alarms), they might not be able to legally enforce this protection from the landlord due to their illegal status.

According to the three degrees of vulnerability introduced by Cannon (1994), the undocumented community can be identified to have faced a high degree of vulnerability before the 2017 NorCal fire on the basis that undocumented immigrants already live in crisis before disasters strike, trapped in a disadvantageous social status. Moreover, in times of crisis officials supposedly constitute a body of trust and aid for the civil population. Undocumented immigrants, however, had to not only flee from the fire, but also avoid or (in their perception) flee from the authorities. The fear of officials' presence at shelters and local information meetings was apparent, which not only worsened their experience but also heightened their vulnerability, as they were unable to obtain aid in the organized system.

The margins for decreasing undocumented persons' vulnerability status in times of disaster are thus limited due to their restricted capital, the fear of authorities and the exclusion from the nation's support network. Through the perspective of biopower, the continuous exclusion, the denial of support and the creation of fear can be understood as an intentional tool used to weaken those who threaten the citizens' well-being. This topic will be further discussed in 6.4.2.

### (2) Resilience

Another pivotal aspect of analyzing society's impact on a natural disaster focuses on the community's resilience. This incorporates the resistance, recovery, and future reduction of vulnerabilities (Van Zandt et al., 2014: 30). In the course of the interviews, it became apparent that the experts generally identified the local undocumented community as very resilient. In a way, the undocumented community has a supportive network of family and friends as well as local NGOs and CBOs. This reinforcement helps them overcome disasters, by finding new job opportunities and housing for instance. This does not diminish the tremendous impact they suffered, but rather can be seen as a positive mindset approach. After all, this is the only option undocumented immigrants have. Naturally, noncitizens need to recover, just as citizens do, in order to live on after a disaster.

However, taking a step aside from this rather basic assumption, this paper argues that an undocumented individual's resilience is virtually non-existent.

This ties back to the vulnerability types discussed earlier and the assessment that undocumented immigrants' ability to build greater resilience is restricted and can hardly be improved due to their unauthorized legal status in the United States.

Indeed, many of the undocumented immigrants have experienced a slow and difficult recovery after the fire. As indicated earlier, many of them rely on day-labor work, and when a natural disaster occurs, their source of income is severely impacted, making them more vulnerable. With their source of income reduced, along with their homes

destroyed and fear of authorities intensified, undocumented immigrants are deprived of the chance of recovery. Moreover, the political climate in the U.S. has caused them to be further marginalized.

Hence, it can be assumed that their resilience to a natural disaster in terms of resistance, recovery and future reduction of vulnerabilities is at a disadvantage. Bolin and Stanford (1998) found in their study on the Northridge earthquake, that most Mexican migrant workers have less personal assets (i.e. property, savings accounts, insurance) to use in the case of an emergency. In addition, those that were undocumented could not qualify for much of the emergency relief offered by the government (Bolin and Stanford, 1998). In this regard it must be assumed that many undocumented immigrants affected by the NorCal fire lack also various forms of insurance, adequate financial support, savings, access to hazard-proof materials for their homes due to financial restrictions and so forth, ultimately tracing back to their illegal status. Moreover, future improvement of their resiliency cannot be accomplished by the undocumented community themselves; only through the implementation of new strategies specifically supporting undocumented immigrants in a disaster can this be achieved.

*“The analysis of disasters often finds [...] that systemic weaknesses in the form of social vulnerabilities are often generated by the systems themselves. Returning or bouncing back to the pre-disaster state is not necessarily resilient or adaptive but rather lays the seeds for future disasters” (Van Zandt et al., 2014: 30).*

The little support for undocumented immigrants in a disaster can thus be said to originate in the systemic weakness generated by the social political system. The system of denying undocumented immigrants not only access to disaster relief, but also continuously refusing them the opportunity to improve their ridged socioeconomic position has fostered social vulnerabilities as well as cultivated non-existent resilience. It is the political system, especially the current rhetoric of the Trump administration, which intensifies this situation. This methodical, exclusionary process does not allow them to improve their resilience to a natural disaster, and hence predetermines the

ruinous impact. It is assumable that the political discourse coming out of the White House is not going to change this situation, identifiable in the anti-immigration approach.

In opposition to the exclusionary White House administration approach towards undocumented immigrants, this population can only find support in their own social networks, NGO's and CBO's and private donations. The state of California has recently been enacting policies in favor of undocumented immigrants, which has established some state funding available to local organizations. Due to this paper's limits, this is not discussed in detail. Nevertheless, access to monetary resources, as well as self-protection methods, for the undocumented community is significantly smaller in comparison to citizens. In this regard it is evident that the resilience of undocumented immigrants remains stagnate in a very vulnerable position and can only be improved by major social policy changes on local as well as federal levels.

### (3) Difference in Communication System

Another negative influence on the undocumented community's resilience can be found in their restrained social connections and the resulting one-sided information during a disaster.

It was explained in the interviews that the main source of information for undocumented immigrants was mainly word of mouth from family and friends. Both the usage of a common language and a greater trust in their personal social network than in the governmental information are the rationale behind this.

Arguably, the undocumented community is highly dependent on their social circle, which can be highly detrimental in a disaster situation. In the worst case, no information is available within the social circle or wrong information is disseminated. Such was the case when rumors of immigration screening at the shelters spread, leading many to bypass the aid of the organizational system. This information circulation can be explained by Granovetter's (1983) differentiation between weak and strong ties. Strong ties are someone's immediate social circle such as family and friends, while weak ties

are acquaintances, a broader network of different social groups to which someone has access. With this, Granovetter argues,

*“[...] individuals with few weak ties will be deprived of information from distant parts of the social system and will be confined to the provincial news and views of their close friends. This deprivation will not only insulate them from the latest ideas and fashions but may put them in a disadvantaged position [...] without weak ties, any momentum generated in this way does not spread beyond the clique. As a result, most of the population will be untouched”* (Granovetter, 1983: 202)

Hence, the undocumented immigrants’ main source of information is unilateral and puts them at yet another disadvantage, increasing their vulnerability and decreasing their resistance. A reason for not strengthening their weak ties can be found in the prevailing fear of greater networks, not knowing who to trust but their family and friends.

Despite this, a certain degree of outreach to weaker ties in the form of supportive local organizations can be seen. This refers back to the resilience of undocumented immigrants: they alone are not resilient, but the help of organizations provides them with more information on how to face the aftermaths of the fire.

#### (4) Rebuilding vs. Change

After a disaster, financial aid flows from government sources and private funds (e.g. insurance) into the affected community. Usually, this improves the economy because reconstruction efforts and results subsequently trickle down and positively impact other businesses like the hotels, restaurants, construction supply companies, and other supplementary companies. For instance, construction companies are active and hire more workers for job sites, boosting the employment rates.

On the one side, the undocumented community can benefit from this rebuilding process through new job opportunities and, with this, gain access to a greatly needed salary. On the other hand, contractors take advantage of undocumented immigrants’ desperate

situation with labor opportunities that are often extremely underpaid and hazardous. Thus, undocumented immigrants are stuck in a vicious cycle; a cycle in which they desperately need an income but have little option to escape this situation.

In the case of the areas affected by the NorCal, local organizations tried to minimize the exploitation. In connection to the aforementioned argumentation, these efforts of local organizations, although positive, do not address the root issues of the vicious cycle in which the undocumented community is trapped.

With this in mind, it becomes evident that change inclusive of both citizens and noncitizens alike is central. While the rebuilding process of a community is pivotal for a return to normalcy, the improvement of everyone's resilience in the community should be ensured for a community to be resilient to disasters

*“Cities must take advantage of the opportunities for change and improvement after a disaster event to avoid similar challenges in the future. Great lessons may also be learned through the successes, and failures, of communities that have experienced events that are risk factors for your own area. Although disaster recovery is always difficult, planners must take the time to assess the vulnerabilities and ensure that actions are taken to mitigate these risks and provide a more resilient future for coming generations” (Van Zandt, 2014: 181).*

The emotional period after a disaster constitutes a window of opportunity for greater change and improvement (Plevel, 1997). In regards to the NorCal 2017 fires, the experts interviewed indicated that recommendations for policy changes in some of the affected counties have been made by the local community, including notions about the undocumented community specifically. However, the questions of if and in what ways the changes will be implemented is not foreseeable at this point, as well as if undocumented immigrants will benefit from the changes when the next disaster strikes. It needs to be acknowledged on all fronts that the undocumented community was tremendously affected and left behind in misery throughout the 2017 NorCal Fire. Their high degree of vulnerability before the fire even struck determined their status as



*the poorest of the poor*, and, consequently, their lives were more greatly threatened than the vast majority. Their almost non-existent resilience to disaster is inseparably connected to their high degree of vulnerability which, in turn, is a product of their constrained mobility in improving their socioeconomic position as well as the omnipresent fear which withholds them from socially connecting outside their ‘strong ties’.

#### **6.4.2 Biopolitics: Vulnerability and Resilience**

To conclude the discussion of this paper, this last section considers the effects of the NorCal fire 2017 on the undocumented immigrants through the perspective of biopolitics.

It is apparent that the illegal status of the community in focus perpetuates their inability to cope with and resist disaster in the same way as the rest of the population. The study showed that they are excluded from emergency planning, vital communication, and also post-recovery monetary aid. One may venture to question if this exclusion was intentional in order to purposefully subject undocumented immigrants to high vulnerability and low resilience.

In the rationality of biopolitics, the government has full authority and predetermines the undocumented community’s unfortunate fates. The government allocates the need for support by citizens and noncitizens, or the ‘undifferentiated’ and ‘differentiated’ bodies, respectively. While the undifferentiated have access to federal funds provided in the aftermaths, the differentiated are excluded, and even identified as a threat to the nation’s well-being. The way in which the Trump administration accuses undocumented immigrants of causing an extensive array of the nation’s social problems outlines the justification to deny them access to federal aid. Using this logic, giving support to the undocumented would take away resources from those who deserve it due to their citizenship. Thus, the differentiated are unworthy.

Because of their marginalization as a “differentiated” community, undocumented persons are not given a reasonable chance to cope with the disaster. Moreover, fear is

exercised over them as a tool of power, which places the undocumented population at an even greater risk as they attempt to flee from both the fire and the authorities simultaneously.

Through the lens of biopolitics it can be argued that the undocumented community becomes a target of the government and are intentionally weakened. By identifying them as the nation's enemy, the state casts them aside and mobilizes to protect its citizens. In this sense, federal money should not benefit those that supposedly exploit the welfare system and otherwise bring harm to the country. In alignment with the anti-immigration approach of the White House, it can be said that, [...] *achieving an overall equilibrium that protects the security of the whole from internal dangers*" (Foucault, 2003: 249) is the overarching goal.

Lastly, the government pushes the undocumented community further and further into a marginalized position, not affording them the same chance for post-disaster recovery as citizens. In this sense, the government has great power over the lives of the undocumented community.

This power can be used in many different ways. For one, the government can use the denial and exclusion of aid as a deterrent effect to undocumented immigrants. More importantly, however, the power can be used to weaken undocumented immigrants even further in order to take greater advantage of their suppressed status, by publicly communicating and characterizing them as "*pariahs, criminals who menace American neighborhoods, take American jobs, sap American resources and exploit American generosity*" (Yee, Davis, & Patel, 2017). In this way, it is possible to suppress a group of people to the extreme and take full advantage of their rather hopeless position.

## 7. Conclusion

Currently, an estimated 11.1 million people reside in the United States without legal documentation to live and work, the majority of whom are of Latin American origin living in California. Here, they exist in a grey area in which their status of illegality is ubiquitous, yet unseen. While the motives of residing in the United States unauthorized vary widely, the challenges in their daily lives are the same. Undocumented persons' preexisting high vulnerability and little resilience become greatly aggravated and markedly exacerbated by natural disasters.

This research topic was inspired when the author was working in Northern California in a community with a high number of undocumented immigrants, during which time she witnessed the largest recorded wildfire in California's modern history. The image of the fire was frightfully breathtaking; yet, peeling back the layers of the disaster's effects on the undocumented community revealed the true direness of their situation. In order to comprehend their invisible reality, this research paper approached the subject through two built-upon dimensions. Of which the first outlined the daily life characteristics of the undocumented community and analyzed the current White House administration's anti-immigration rhetoric through the perspective of Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics. The corresponding research question asked, *How can the undocumented immigrants' daily challenges be comprehended given the backdrop of the current US political climate through the framework of biopolitics?*

As the undocumented community is physically present yet legally absent, their daily lives are severely impacted by intertwined social-political factors. Without legal documents to work in the United States, for instance, undocumented immigrants have limited options for employment, often working in the construction, agriculture, and hospitality industries. Given this fact, their wages are usually below the national average, providing little or no safety net (i.e. savings accounts or insurance policies) and, consequently, limiting vertical mobility. Further, their housing alternatives are also restricted, often leading to mixed-status households.

Furthermore, much friction exists in the current US political climate between the federal and state bodies. At the federal level, the White House has taken a clear stance against undocumented immigrants by implementing policies encouraging DHS deportation raids, calling for the construction of physical border walls, and spreading President Trump's occasional anti-immigrant rhetoric. On the other hand, sanctuary states like California have implemented legislation, such as SB54, to protect undocumented immigrants. CBOs and NGOs have also worked tirelessly to provide resources and opportunities for the undocumented community. However, this friction between the governments has cultivated confusion and fear among the undocumented population, ultimately causing an overall distrust of all government authorities.

Through the lens of biopolitics, this research paper argued that the federal government uses this feeling of constant fear as a tool to maintain power over the undocumented immigrants; to isolate and define them as 'other'; to weaken their resolve through the denial of support and comfort. This control reaffirms the mechanism of protecting lawful citizens from those threatening the nation's well-being.

Built upon the daily constraints embedded in their status of illegality, the second dimension outlines the impact on the community's vulnerability and resilience in regards to the devastating NorCal fire and asks, *How has the NorCal 2017 fire affected the vulnerability and resilience of the local undocumented community?* Subsequently, this facet discusses the denial of disaster relief to the undocumented community through the rationality of biopolitics, asking, *Given the exclusion of undocumented immigrants from disaster funds, how can the intentions of the current White House administration be explained using the concept of biopolitics?*

When Northern California experienced the massive fire in October of 2017, the affected communities were in chaos, especially the local undocumented population. Notwithstanding the physical threat of the fire, this already-vulnerable group faced specific complications including the disbursement of emergency information primarily in English and the paralyzing fear any government officials. In the wake of the fire, the predetermined high degree of vulnerability worsened considerably.

The undocumented immigrants are survivors: they have been able to find housing and employment despite the challenges; moreover, there were no reported fatalities from the fire. Yet the undocumented community's resilience is questionable. This research paper has consulted Van Zandt et al.'s (2014: 30) definition of resilience, which incorporates the resistance, recovery, and future reduction of vulnerabilities. According to this meaning, the undocumented immigrants have not been able to absorb or resist impact shocks from the fire; rather, they are forced to alter their lives in order to survive. This is due to the fact that the undocumented community is denied the opportunity to improve their socioeconomic position, which fosters social vulnerabilities and, in turn, cultivates a non-existent resilience. Moreover, their resilience is disadvantaged due to their unilateral information source. Their social circle predominantly consists of strong internal ties, with weak ties to the wider community lacking due to the omnipresent fear. Furthermore, resilience calls for the improvement of one's situation after an ordeal; however, sufficient evidence to conclude that the affected undocumented immigrants are now living in better conditions, post-fire, does not exist. The fire destroyed homes, commercial buildings, vineyards, and harmed the tourist-hospitality industry, exhaustively eliminating employment opportunities and forcing the undocumented to accept more hazardous employment.

The efforts of the CBOs and NGOs, support of the sanctuary states, and contributions of individuals are what have subsidized the resiliency and mitigated the vulnerability of the undocumented immigrants. According to this research, it appears that this population is caught in a vicious cycle of being increasingly vulnerable and diminishingly resilient after the NorCal wildfire occurred; additionally, without the support of both the federal and California state governments, the sequence of devastation will continue. Nevertheless, it is the discovery and acknowledgement of these characteristics that is the first step in breaking this detrimental cycle for the undocumented immigrants in the United States.

Lastly, the paper returns to the discussion of the exclusionary process of the undocumented community through the lens of biopolitics' rationality and questions if this marginalization by the government is intentional in order to purposefully subjugate this population to greater vulnerability and less resilience. By identifying the undocumented as the cause of the nation's social problems, as articulated in the current White House's rhetoric, they legitimately become the differentiated, the 'other', and are thus deemed unworthy of opportunity, of security. In this way, the government maintains a position of great power, providing undocumented persons little hope of escaping this vicious cycle.

Indeed, a high percentage of California's undocumented population lives in WUI zones on the outskirts of society, which are areas where the NorCal fire occurred and which will be prone to future disastrous fires. Thus, it is foreseeable that countless undocumented persons will, yet again, be tremendously affected if no changes are made. As humankind continues to move into WUI zones, the risk of greater impacts continuously increases, and can be identified as a "*disaster by design*" (Van Zandt et al., 2014: 8). However, for the undocumented community, this definition takes upon a whole different meaning. For them, this disaster by design is not only created by the WUI, but also by the relentless exclusionary process of the federal government embedded in their illegality. Hence, the federal government's identification of the NorCal fire 2017 as a "*major disasters*" needs to acknowledge the disproportionate impact on the undocumented community, regardless of their relatively hidden dimension, they are physically present and are human beings after all.

#### Possible Future Research

The subject matter discussed within the limits of this study presented additional topics and questions for future research to explore. 'Natural disasters' are complex phenomena that will endlessly threaten society and have the potential to afflict incredible damage. For example, further research on the distinct characteristics between the undocumented ethnic groups would provide deeper insight on their

vulnerability and resiliency. Also, further research on the advocates of undocumented immigrants, such as CBOs, NGOs, and even sanctuary states, would provide more information on the cycle that continues to marginalize undocumented immigrants, given that their time and resources may sometimes be diverted to wage a political battle against the White House.

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# Appendices

## Appendix I: Interview Guideline

| <b>BEFORE THE DISASTER</b>                         |  |  |   |
|--|--|--|---|
|  | <b>Main Questions</b>  | <b>Supplementary Questions</b>   | <b>Additional Notes</b>   |
| <b>General</b>                                     | <b>1. Can you describe the general situation of undocumented immigrants in the counties you are most involved in?</b>        | <p><i>How involved are they in the local community?</i></p> <p><i>Is the matter of undocumented status something omnipresent among families? (Is it something discussed or is it taboo?)</i></p> <p><i>In what ways can undocumented immigrants be described as a "specific" minority group?</i></p> | Description of undocumented immigrants among the counties.                          |
| <b>Job, income distribution and economic needs</b> | <b>2. Can you discuss the employment opportunities of an undocumented immigrant?</b>   | <p><i>How stable are their jobs? If it is considered day labor, how often do they seek employment?</i></p> <p><i>How do they seek employment?</i></p>  |   |
|  | <b>3. How do you feel about the contribution value from undocumented immigrants in the counties?</b>                         | <i>What roles do undocumented immigrants play in your community/county?</i>  | Necessity of designated labor   |
| <b>Housing and urban space</b>                     | <b>4. Can you describe the housing situation of undocumented immigrants?</b>   | <i>What are the conditions of the living spaces? Is it different than other people with different document status in the community?</i>  |   |
| <b>Political Climate</b>                           | <b>5. Considering the Trump Administration, can you explain what changes you have noticed in the day-to-day lives of the</b> | <i>What has changed and how has it impacted people on the individual level for members of the Latino community?</i>  | Visible changes (increase of fear for ICE, deportation, etc., tensions, increase of |

|                                    |  |   |   |
|------------------------------------|--|---|---|
|                                    | <b>Hispanic community, especially those with an undocumented status.</b>   |   | willpower and mobilization for improving the situation, etc.)   |
| <b>DURING THE DISASTER</b>         |  |   |   |
| <b>Access and resources</b>        | <b>6. Can you describe the stories that you have heard of undocumented immigrants or mixed status families fleeing from the fires?</b>                             | <i>How were they alerted to evacuate and where did they flee to? (language of information, technical devices, etc.)</i><br><br><i>What immediate support was trusted?</i> | alerts to evacuate, where to find shelter information, Accepting the help of government and NGOs with shelter, food, healthcare |
| <b>Communication</b>               | <b>7. What was your experience with the communication of emergency information from authorities to the affected public?</b>  | <i>Was the information accessible to everyone?</i><br><i>(sufficient for every community member/community group)</i>  | language barriers all inclusive or did the information exclude certain groups?  |
| <b>Trust of information source</b> | <b>8. Where do undocumented immigrants receive their information from? What source of information do they trust during a disaster?</b>                             | <i>In your opinion, how trustworthy were governmental information (local and federal) to undocumented immigrants during the disaster?</i>                                 | church, family, government, locals, etc., word of mouth<br><br>news stations (Spanish speaking or other?)<br>social media       |
|                                    | <b>9. Can you describe the most significant contributions from the government and non-governmental organizations during the fires for undocumented immigrants?</b> | <i>In your opinion, did the government (from local and federal) and NGOs offer enough immediate resources and information during the disaster?</i>                        | governmental institutions: limits and possibilities   |



|                                      |   |   |  |
|--------------------------------------|---|---|--|
|                                      | <b>10. Was there any specific outreach to the undocumented immigrants?<br/>And how to treat or support them?</b>  | <i>Did other authorities such as police or the fire department offer a special services to the undocumented immigrants?</i> |  |
| <b>POST DISASTER</b>                 |   |   |  |
| <b>Status-quo</b>                    | <b>11. Four months after the fires: Can you describe the present situation of the victims and the communities?</b>  | <i>What information do you have about their current situation?</i>  | Where did they go?<br>Who helped them and in what ways?<br>Were there any interesting cases of recovery? |
| <b>Possibilities and Limitations</b> | <b>12. What strategies are you aware of that were offered to undocumented immigrants after the fires?</b>   | <i>Who provides them?</i>   | availability of support from government and others   |
| <b>Political Climate</b>             | <b>13. Undocumented immigrants are often referred to as illegal immigrants. As Trump stated, undocumented immigrants are illegal by residing in the country.<br/><br/>How do you feel about this?</b> | <i>In your opinion, in what ways does the federal government have to take responsibility for undocumented immigrants?</i>   |  |
| <b>Anti-immigration</b>              | <b>14. California vs. White House: Can you describe in what ways anti-immigrant policies should be overlooked during times of crisis, such as the 2017 Northern California Fires?</b>                 | <i>What policies and rules were overlooked and what was not?</i>  |  |

## **Appendix II: Selected Statements: Interviewees' Perception on the Current Political Climate**

*“You know from my perspective as a community organizer it is important that we as much as possible continue to support undocumented immigrants. To be able to built power and mobilize and get to the polls when - if they themselves cannot vote but they have family members who can. [...]. I think our role is to continue to support and then make sure those folks are protected” (Interview\_8).*

*“I really have no faith in the government to find an actual way to undocumented immigrants at this point” (Interview\_7).*

*“It is probably impossible to understand, this country is so graved with xenophobia [...]. It is a very deeply unjust, it is a really destructive, evil system” (Interview\_1).*

*“But he even has immigrants for his own company, I think it is more - he is trying to appeal to the base of that elected him. And I think that a lot of it comes from his own ignorance of people. Because he grew up in a privileged, with a privileged life. He does not understand other people life's experiences” (Interview\_3).*

*“Immigrants have always been part of this country. So for us to try to be against them, I think is wrong. It is wrong and we need them, we always had them in our country. [...] One of the things is we're a nation of immigrants, but it seems like when some groups have been here for a number of generations then they don't want the new immigrants to be part of the group” (Interview\_3\_email).*

*“I would say Trump's followers are blinded by the hate” (Interview\_2).*

*“For me, it is my personal opinion, he is a racist and that is ignorant. Most of us shake our heads [...]. I think it comes down to poor leadership. The fact that the president did not even acknowledge what happened here in California - he never came there was no visit. At other disasters you see presidents that visit the sights and come and look. We did not see any of that. It seems like a child [...].” (Interview\_4).*