

# The Politics of Security: How Social Constructions are utilized in the Securitization of Migration

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**Abstract:** This work explores the relationship between social constructions and the securitization process. The theoretical basis of securitization should be married to the concept of social constructions when exploring the securitizing actor addressal of contact between a target group and a referent object. To illustrate this, this paper discusses the connection between US immigration policies and negative perceptions of unauthorized immigrants in the US. This leads to an analysis of why the phenomena of migration is treated as a major threat to domestic safety. The work demonstrates how and why importance is placed on securitization of a specific targeted group, unauthorized immigrants in the US, and the lengths taken to maintain their marginalization in society. This paper argues that negative conceptions of the worthiness and deservedness of unauthorized immigrants must be instilled and widely accepted to maintain and expand the power of the homeland defense infrastructure.

**Keywords:** US Immigration policy, Social constructionism, Securitization, Unauthorized immigrants

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## Introduction

The political landscape is set in borders, and solidification through legal protections is the undisputed norm. Statehood is reliant on parameters within a territory, which when contested, prompt severe repercussions such as war. In the same vein, when individuals' cross national borders without abiding

by the legal procedures of the receiving country, extreme action can be taken. A state may respond to such an occurrence by solidification and enforcement of the sanctity of its borders. However severe the measures taken are dependent on variables such as the political and social atmosphere.

The case of the United States begs special attention today given the exaggerated response the current government has taken to the delicate circumstances of undocumented people entering the United States from its southern border. Many of this state's immigration measures for addressing its southern border have been condemned by human rights organizations, such as the Human Rights Watch, for endangering the lives of migrating people. Inhumane conditions at the border did not appear out of nowhere<sup>211</sup>. How did the United States get to a point at which the population is willing to let asylum seekers undergo traumatic and violating conditions?

In seeking to understand the human implications of securitization of migration, this work utilizes the case of the United States and its social and political atmosphere. The purpose of looking at the circumstances, policy, and political response, is to analyze these components for evidence of social constructions that isolate undocumented immigrants from the greater American population. This is looked at as part of the process of the securitization of migration. This work intends to answer the question: how are social constructions of undocumented immigrant facilitated towards the securitization of migration at the United States southern border?

## Securitization

Securitization is a broad framework discussed in the emerging political science discipline of security sciences. Credited to the Copenhagen school, securitization is a logic of security built on the constructivist theory of

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<sup>211</sup> Clara Long, "Written Testimony: "Kids in Cages: Inhumane Treatment at the Border" Testimony of Clara Long Before the U.S. House Committee on Oversight and Reform, Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Civil Liberties, July 11, 2019," (Human Rights Watch 2019), <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/07/11/written-testimony-kids-cages-inhumane-treatment-border>. Long is specifically referencing treatment of minors in custody and provides evidence of inhumane conditions, the lack of caregivers, poor hygiene and health, and family separations as unnecessarily traumatic conditions.

international relations. Securitization holds the assumption that security threats are always existential for the survival of a particular referent object, be it the state, population, territory, identity, culture, social order, and so on<sup>212</sup>. The securitization framework characterizes security as:

(...) a distinct modality marked by utmost urgency, priority of action and the breaking free of 'normal rules' of politics: with the process of securitization, an issue is dramatized as an issue of supreme priority, so that an agent can legitimately claim a need to raise the issue above the constraints of regular political rules and procedure and open debate to treat it by 'extraordinary measures'<sup>213</sup>.

Therefore, securitization is the identifying and legitimizing of a threat, and as a constructivist framework, facilitates an understanding of the political mechanism required to create security measures and promote these measures until a threat resides at an acceptable level.

Securitization theory has three principal elements in its interpretations. First, the speech act references the utterances that begin security action<sup>214</sup>. The second and third aspect include the securitizing actor and the audience; these groups hold unequal power to affect security<sup>215</sup>. The securitizing actor participates in the diagnosis of the threat components and the desired route of response. The audience participates in actions to neutralize the threat by accepting that it exists and fearing it. The securitizing actor negotiates with the audience; the pretext of the speech act guides this interaction.

## Social Constructionism

Coming from sociological studies, social constructions are fundamentally about knowledge and human conceptions of reality. This concept has been fit into the discussion of policy scientists to describe various phenomena

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<sup>212</sup> Holger Stritzel, "Part I: Theory" in *Security in Translation Securitization Theory and the Localization of Threat* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2014), 15.

<sup>213</sup> Holger Stritzel, "Part I: Theory," 15.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid.

including “different populations [being] forced by economic necessity, inaccessibility, or lack of well-being in public spaces... into marginalized use of public space”<sup>216</sup>. Social constructs as a concept of policy explore the role of ideological intentions and linguistic presentation in social policy<sup>217</sup>.

First used in policy studies by Schneider and Ingram to describe the interaction between policy makers and target groups, social constructions provide a well-constructed framework by which the political and normative aspects of public policy can be understood<sup>218</sup>. The merger of such concepts allows for greater depth of understanding social policy formulation and implementation.

A comprehensive definition of social constructions came out of Schneider and Ingram’s work, defined as “widely held portrayals of particular groups of people that have been created through a dynamic and often endogenous process that involves history, politics, culture, socialization, religion, and the media, conveyed through images, symbols, stories, metaphors, and synecdoche”<sup>219</sup>.

In these portrayals, human attributes are used to define and construct different social collectives. Different social collectives become associated to values that once ingrained become nearly impossible to deconstruct. Social constructions develop through the processes of policy implementation, and target groups internalize the prescribed values and may even incorporate them into their perceptions of self.

Although other mechanisms drive the ability for these representations to permeate society, social policy materializes to enact and fortify the boundaries between social collectives. The result of such conceptions is taking hold

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<sup>216</sup> Colin Samson and Nigel South, “Social Policy isn’t what It Used to Be –The Social Construction of Social Policy in the 1980s and 1990s” in *The Social Construction of Social Policy Methodologies, Racism, Citizenship and the Environment 1st. Ed.* (London, Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1996), 9.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>218</sup> Travis P Wagner and Lisa A Morris, “Improving Comprehension of Public Policy Design Using Social Constructions of Target Populations Theory” in *Journal of Public Affairs Education* 24, no. 2 (April 3, 2018), 195.

<sup>219</sup> Travis P Wagner and Lisa A Morris, “Improving Comprehension of Public Policy Design,” 197.

of conditions of community interactions. Racialization is a very prominent process best understood as a perpetuation of the social construction “race”. In all instances of racialization, there is a representational process of defining an “Other”, deemed essential to boundary formation, and accompanied by a key ideological inversion<sup>220</sup>. The racialization process is motivated by political interests and carried out by the implementation of such a policy.

“Race” is a concept rejected by quarters of the scientific community due to there being no biological evidence for racial categorization<sup>221</sup>. The notion is outdated and even disproven, but yet “race” is a persistent concept in the social and political landscape of the United States. One example of race being utilized in American law is the case of segregation being enforced to disenfranchise and destabilize African Americans. A “color line” was struck to create a clear distinction within the population and the treatment government and society treated these groups with.

Comprehending this phenomenon of categorization and treatment based upon race serves as a necessary pretext to understanding the current struggles of immigrants as they seek to establish lives through residence within the United States. Classification by linguistic treatments service the interest of creating distinctions with social, economic, and political implications. These distinctions will be codified in law and perpetuated in society leading to repercussions that cultivate social and economic disparities and convolution of identities that help people understand themselves.

## Immigration Policy

Immigration policy across the globe exists within the realm of security. Aspects of securing borders and statehood through security feature a civil code that outline the stipulations associated with taking up space within

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<sup>220</sup> Bob Carter and Marci Green, “Naming Difference: Race-thinking, Common Sense and Sociology” in *The Social Construction of Social Policy Methodologies, Racism, Citizenship and the Environment* (London, Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1996), 58.

<sup>221</sup> M. Kawashima, “The Scientific Rejection of Race” in *American History, Race and the Struggle for Equality An Unfinished Journey* (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2017), 5.

a state. Enforcing these stipulations, the law and justice community retaliate against cases of the undocumented. Further than the walls and fences raised, internment and detention centers filled, and patrolling units watching the physical space demarcated as borders, federal immigration enforcement agencies increasingly enter community spaces to insert their influence.

Immigration policy in the US has long been charged with extracting migrant labor without protecting or providing for the individual laborers<sup>222</sup>. The case of “Operation Wetback” in the early 1950s demonstrates the concerted efforts of Border Patrol to respond to a manufacturer issue of illegal entrance into the US by “reproduc[ing] a captive pool of migrant farm workers who were tied to coercive contracts, subject to exploitation in the fields and separated from the costs of family reproduction”<sup>223</sup>.

This policy did not last due to its exclusive character which institutionalized a system that treated Mexican workers as outsiders. It represented a form of blatant racially motivated discrimination which was out of line with the energy the civil rights movement brought to public policy in the 1960s. From this point on, the structure of the immigration law in the US became organized under the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA). The INA is comprehensive in nature, addressing most of the necessary processes and procedures concerning “aliens and nationality”.<sup>224</sup> Unlawful presence in the US, as codified by this document, decides the difference between someone who is documented and someone who is not. As a result of this law, an order is justified and carried out by the enforcement community.

This legal code stipulates region-based immigration quotas, which disproportionately impacts Mexican immigrants. This policy was instituted shortly before the rise of Mexican and central American immigrants into

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<sup>222</sup> Marcel Paret. “Legality and Exploitation: Immigration Enforcement and the US Migrant Labor System.” *Latino Studies* 12, no. 4 (December 2, 2014): 503–4.

<sup>223</sup> Marcel Paret. “Legality and Exploitation: Immigration Enforcement and the US Migrant Labor System,” 512–13.

<sup>224</sup> U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. “Immigration and Nationality Act.” at *Legal Resources* (Washington 10 July 2019). <https://www.uscis.gov/legal-resources/immigration-and-nationality-act>.

urban centers within the US, many of which entered illegally due to the increased difficulty of entering legally due to the imposed quota system<sup>225</sup>. The Reagan administration then began the process of massively building up border resources as part of its War on Drugs and ideological opposition to communism<sup>226</sup>.

In later years the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) was designed to reduce the number of illegal migrations and promote placement of documented people in jobs by penalizing employers for under the table contracts and increased funding for border security<sup>227</sup>.

Faucets of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and local law enforcement interact to carry out the INA as well as executive orders that address border security. The expansion of security at the southern border in the post-9/11 restructuring of the US security apparatus, is maintained and progressed further by increasing the level of pressure to combat unauthorized migrations.

This policy, in conjunction with the quota system, has generally been considered a failure in promoting the legal entrance or preventing undocumented people from making and maintaining residence within the confines of US borders. Throughout the 1990s till present, policies that situate immigrant workers from Mexico and Central America as “illegal”, seek to enhance the difficulty of their everyday lives as a means of penalizing them.

Many issues arise out of this broken system. Immigration enforcement targets the most vulnerable people for deportation, using racial profiling as a means of identifying undocumented migrants, penalizing and deporting in some cases legal migrants, and contributing to the segregation of communities and labor<sup>228</sup>. The drastic and militaristic vigor in which im-

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<sup>225</sup> Marcel Paret. “Legality and Exploitation: Immigration Enforcement and the US Migrant Labor System” 514.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid.

<sup>227</sup> Ibid., 515.

<sup>228</sup> Marcel Paret. “Legality and Exploitation: Immigration Enforcement and the US Migrant Labor System,” 516.

migration is controlled has been built up significantly since 9/11 with the inclusion of many immigration control agencies under The Department of Homeland Security (DHS).

Existing at the federal level, DHS is the central entity for processing and treating immigrants. The DHS states its mission is to “safeguard the American people, our homeland, and our values”<sup>229</sup>. Its function since its foundation in 2002, has been to carry out security policy through its twenty-two departments. Formed out of the post-9/11 restructuring of US homeland defense, it is a unit which prides itself on zero-tolerance addressal of security issues.

Within the broad scope of this zero-tolerance standard, the Alien Transfer Exit Program (ATEP) seeks to expedite the removal of unauthorized immigrants by criminally prosecuting all unauthorized immigrants<sup>230</sup>. Border Security is charged with carrying out this directive, and in order to do so, it receives a significant amount of federal funding. Increased demands for labor, education, and law enforcement, also places pressure on public servants to conform to the security apparatus’ sense of order and plays a role in combatting undocumented people’s ability to participate in American society<sup>231</sup>.

Laws and enforcement procedures that do not directly target undocumented immigrants contribute to the institutionalization of their illegality. Many states have petty laws that ensnare migrants into breaking the law<sup>232</sup>. For example, driving without a valid driver’s license is illegal. In most states it is illegal for unauthorized people to obtain a valid driver’s license; therefore, an undocumented persons process of deportation could begin at a routine traffic stop when they are unable to present a driver’s license. Stipulations such as this contribute to the ability of local law enforcement to apprehend

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<sup>229</sup> U.S. Department of Homeland Security. “Mission” at About DHS (Washington 3 July 2019). <https://www.dhs.gov/mission>.

<sup>230</sup> Amuedo-Dorantes, Catalina, and Pozo, Susan. “On the Intended and Unintended Consequences of Enhanced U.S. Border and Interior Immigration Enforcement: Evidence From Mexican Deportees.” *Demography* 51, no. 6 (December 2014), 2258.

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*, 2259.

<sup>232</sup> Amanda Armenta, “Being Proactive: On the Streets in Southeast Nashville” in *Protect, Serve, and Deport: The Rise of Policing as Immigration Enforcement* (Oakland, University of California Press, 2017), 61.



unauthorized people at which point the federal government can take their case and submit them for deportation or detention<sup>233</sup>. These punitive justice measures make even more delicate the already precarious legal standing of unauthorized immigrants. This strict order of prohibiting the unauthorized people is built upon a system that traps immigrants into committing petty offenses, and then utilizes this to remove them from society<sup>234</sup>.

These policies culminate into a marginalized place in society with very little, if any, opportunity for migrants to rise out of. The individuals who make up the US's undocumented immigrants exist within a system that would rather see them disappear than work with them to process their authorization and settle them. This is a process that intentionally isolates and demonizes migrants, and in the process it mobilizes enhanced federal policing in the workplace, schools, and streets.

Should someone navigate around all the barriers to their illicit entry, the threat of being caught still looms overhead with instances of employment offices and residences raided, traffic stops utilized to identify the unauthorized, and other aspects of defense security that enter the scope and practice of everyday law enforcement procedure. It is the right of the state to ensure the sanctity of its boundaries, but the mechanisms by which these borders are protected increasingly blurs the lines between community safety and domestic security.

## Immigrants

An estimated population of 11.3 million unauthorized immigrants live inside the US<sup>235</sup>. These are individuals who, either by choice or necessity, do not hold citizenship, asylum, or a related status that would qualify them

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<sup>233</sup> Ibid.

<sup>234</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>235</sup> Migration Policy Institute. "Unauthorized Immigrant Population Profiles." Data Hub (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2016), <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/programs/us-immigration-policy-program-data-hub/unauthorized-immigrant-population-profiles>. Statistic utilizes data from the 2016 census to estimate the number of undocumented persons living in the US.

for residence in the US. They exist as outsiders of an “official” national community. The main, tangible difference between an American national and an undocumented person is their civil status, a condition with implications in many aspects of daily life. Despite this, depictions of immigrants as threatening American society have long been presented and negative conceptions perpetuated.

To look for justice in states’ immigration systems is not just to catalog the legitimacy of its practices. It is also a discussion of the philosophy upon which the state is built. The concept of “citizen” is integral to the modern constitutional democracy. Rights, representation, and resources are reserved for citizens. These are highly sought after privileges associated with living in a stable state. It is through citizen engagement with democracy that maintains and expands these privileges.

American national identity and nationalism are bound to ethnic understandings of the composition of the state. Although the US is a multiethnic state, its immigration policy is consequential in shaping the ethnic and “racial” composition<sup>236</sup>. Immigration policy is made to benefit the national community, and the sanctity of this entity to be understood as more than just the physical security of persons. The protection of national identity is carried out through an immigration system that has nationality-based quotas. This monitoring of demographics directly shapes the ethnic makeup of the state. Immigrants that enter without authorization disrupt this system, posing a threat to American law and order. Disruptions of the national cohesion and demographic makeup can be legitimized as threats.

Unauthorized immigrants knowingly forgo citizen privileges. They realize that illegality is constructed to meet them, and that this fluid status of “illegal” does not have a neutral perception by the state or its citizens<sup>237</sup>. The

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<sup>236</sup> Elizabeth Kiehne, David Becerra, David Androff, and Katie Stalker, “Pathways to Support for Integrationist Immigration Policymaking Among U.S.-Born Whites: Testing the Deprovincialization Hypothesis of the Intergroup Contact Theory and the Role of Latino Immigrant Threat Perception.” ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, (2019), 2.

<sup>237</sup> Rene D. Flores and Ariela Schachter, (2018). “Who are the ‘Illegals’? The Social Construction of Illegality in the United States,” *American Sociological Review*, 83(5) (2018), 839–868.

whole of undocumented immigrants is a diverse group comprised of close to 50 percent of Mexican origin with migrants from Central America, Asia, South America, the Caribbean, Europe, and Canada making up virtually all other unauthorized immigrants<sup>238</sup>. While the majority of unauthorized immigrants are Latino, they are overrepresented in American perceptions of who unauthorized migrants are<sup>239</sup>.

Depictions of immigrants are often founded on intense fear or pity of the uncertainty of undocumented immigrants. The most extreme cases depict undocumented migrants, particularly those from Mexico, as rapists or gang members. This has been the case in campaign rallies and President Trump's tweets<sup>240</sup>. These dangerous conceptions drive the notion that undocumented people should be met with greater security, both at the borders, and in communities. They also provoke state violence against unauthorized immigrants.

Depictions of the human existence of immigrants is based on their civil status. By not obtaining permission to enter or maintain residence in the US, this group is labeled with umbrella terms such as "illegal immigrants," "illegal aliens," "illegals," "criminal aliens," and other unsavory crafted group signifiers. Elements of truth in these labels make them harmful to those represented by them. Those with an undocumented status require addressal based on their civil condition, however some of these labels carry connotations that service the system of laws, institutional policies, and bureaucratic practices that erase identities and associates them with crime.

Addressing the existence of undocumented migrants could scarcely be done without painting a picture describing who these people are. Unfortunately, this imagery simplifies the reality which is much more complex.

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<sup>238</sup> Elizabeth Kiehne, David Becerra, David Androff, and Katie Stalker, "Pathways to Support for Integrationist Immigration Policymaking Among U.S.-Born Whites: Testing the Deprovincialization Hypothesis of the Intergroup Contact Theory and the Role of Latino Immigrant Threat Perception," 4.

<sup>239</sup> Karina Moreno and Byron E. Price, "The social and political impact of new (private) National Security: private actors in the securitization of immigration in the U.S. post 9/11", 372.

<sup>240</sup> Marc Hooghe and Ruth Dassonneville, "Explaining the Trump Vote: The Effect of Racist Resentment and Anti-Immigrant Sentiments," American Political Science Association (July 2018), 529.

Undocumented immigrants represent many different people and living under diverse conditions. Categorizing the entire groups in such a manner erases their individual narratives and simplifies them to a label conducive to their being conceived as a threat.

The term “alien” is used in legal code “to describe any person not a citizen or national of the United States”<sup>241</sup>. Alienating undocumented immigrants casts them out of the general society and engenders a norm of their marginalization<sup>242</sup>. Terminology carries intention, and the weight of allowing words like “alien” and “illegal” have repercussions in the daily lives of those represented as outsiders. Labels of “Otherness” is undeserved of unauthorized immigrants. Lacking rights and resources, few undocumented immigrants voice concerns associated with their civil status or representation. Depictions of undocumented immigrants by politicians, policy actors, or the public scarcely discuss the substantial benefits from their contributions.

The label of laboring immigrants has been politicized to depict undocumented labor as “immigrants steal jobs” from those hardworking Americans that deserve them. Although untrue, without evidence, the narrative has persisted from the 1800s to date<sup>243</sup>.

Additionally, undocumented immigrants are portrayed as not paying taxes and yet receiving social benefits. This is false and in fact undocumented immigrants do have taxes withheld from their paychecks and receive few social benefits<sup>244</sup>. In the same vein, undocumented immigrants are often described of as violent criminals. And yet there is unsubstantiated evidence to prove this, rather studies have shown immigrants exhibit lower rates of criminal activity<sup>245</sup>.

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<sup>241</sup> U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. “Immigration and Nationality Act”.

<sup>242</sup> Karina Moreno and Byron E. Price, “The social and political impact of new (private) National Security: private actors in the securitization of immigration in the U.S. post 9/11,” 372.

<sup>243</sup> Robert Pollin, “ECONOMIC PROSPECTS: Can We Please Stop Blaming Immigrants?” *New Labor Forum* 20, no. 1 (2011): 86–89. <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.lib.utc.edu/stable/27920546>, 88.

<sup>244</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>245</sup> Xia Wang, “UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRANTS AS PERCEIVED CRIMINAL THREAT: A TEST OF THE MINORITY THREAT PERSPECTIVE\*.” *Criminology* 50, no. 3 (August 2012): 763.

Immigration policy addresses human lives under socially constructed conditions. The public perception of undocumented immigrants is impacted profoundly by those with an interest to affect them, collectively through policy. The portrayal of unauthorized immigrants as purposefully tearing down a correct and just order allows for their securitization. Unauthorized immigrants as a collective are perceived as a threat to American values, status quo, and physical safety.

## Conclusion

The author is concerned with the social dynamic that exists to command public perception and skew it in favor of perceiving a threat. While immigration policy is a beneficial idea to uphold the sanctity of national borders, it perpetuates harmful barriers between humans in society. Although a system of law and order stabilizes the nation and creates coherence, the frivolous extension of the violent arms of the realm of immigration enforcement should continue to be questioned.

A system that facilitates, perpetuates, and normalizes such abuses must also be put on trial. The US is geographically as well as economically large. It creates many barriers to entry that service the creation of a national identity which it can take extraordinary measures to control and maintain. The prioritization of securitizing over settling can be understood through social constructions of migrants that fit the needs of political decision makers.

The author is concerned with social constructions of migrants as the target group, contributing to the permissibility of inhumane treatment being utilized at the southern border. Should this be proven by the evidence presented throughout the text, it would imply that citizens are not only complicit, but play a major role, in the security acts of their nation. The broader picture here is that violence is being used against a US community to destabilize and dismantle it. When depictions of immigrants are built in order to attribute their existence as unlawful, it extends the space in which defense structures can occupy everyday life. It enables the violent removal of individuals from their jobs, homes, and families.

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