

# A Better Life Despite Discrimination

Miriam Salinas

## BEFORE YOU READ:

1. “Despite” is a preposition. It means that something is true even though there are things that might stop it from being true. For example, “She went to class regularly despite being very busy with three children and a full-time job.”
2. Study the title of this essay. Say what it means in your own words. Try using “despite” in several sentences that describe something in your life.

## Having Brown Skin in the U.S.

When a person moves to another state or country, they are probably looking for a better life. Sometimes moving to another country is not easy, especially if immigrants do not have permits to move and work. Many face racism, especially if they come from Latin America or are people who have brown skin. Some get exploited for cheap labor because of the language barrier.



Anti-Latino bias is on the rise according to <https://salud-america.org/the-shocking-rise-in-anti-latino-hate-crimes/>  
Photo by Brian Jiz: <https://www.pexels.com>.



Years ago, “Juan Crow” laws (like Jim Crow laws), enforced racial discrimination against Mexican Americans. (Photo from the Russell Lee Photography Collection, courtesy of The Dolph Briscoe Center for American History.) Read more about segregation of Latinos at <https://www.latinousa.org/2016/03/11/no-mexicans-allowed-school-segregation-in-the-southwest/>.

While European immigrants who are Caucasian often have a smooth welcome into dominant society, foreigners with brown skin have a more difficult path to acceptance. My family and I have witnessed and been victims of discrimination from white people. They use insults like, “Go back to Mexico,” or “You do not belong here.” Also, they think anyone with brown skin is from Mexico.

## “You Kids Are Criminals”

My son was born in the United States. He goes to high school. One day on his lunch break, he went to the store with his friend. When they entered the store, the cashier told them, “Please put your backpacks behind the counter.” My son first thought it was some type of rule that the store had for everyone. My son and his friend did what the

cashier told them to do. While my son was looking for something to buy, he noticed a group of white kids carrying their backpacks in the store, so he asked his friend, "Did you notice that white kids have their backpacks and we do not?"

My son's friend responded, "Yes, and this is not something new. It happens every time we come to the store." My son was confused, so he asked his friend, "Why?"

He said, "Because they think we are criminals."

My son asked, "How do you know this?"

His friend answered, "Because she told me. I asked her one day, 'Why do we have to leave our backpacks behind the counter?' And she replied, 'Because you kids are criminals.'"

### You'll Get Fired if You Complain

Undocumented immigrants are easily exploited by their employers. Unauthorized immigrant workers are often afraid to complain about unpaid wages and working conditions because they can get fired from work or even get deported. Therefore, they feel frightened to join unions and get help from worker organizations.

Before I got my DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) status, I worked illegally in a canning factory. I worked hard 12 hours a day for



*A cannery work processes fish. Photo credit Grant Callegari/Hakai Magazine.*

7 days a week. One day, a supervisor put me with a crew that was doing very hard labor. The crew was all men. For three months, I did this work, which was at a higher pay grade, but I did not get higher pay. Since I was working as a subcontractor, I complained to the company that contracted me. They told me if they had to file a complaint about this, I would get fired. This is just one example of how employers get power to exploit and underpay undocumented workers.

## Discrimination against Immigrant Workers Is Illegal



According to the U.S. Department of Labor, the 1964 Civil Rights Act prohibits discrimination against workers. According to the ACLU, "the National Labor Relations Act, OSHA, and Fair Labor Standards Act require employers not to discriminate on the basis of race, to comply with certain health, safety, and minimum wage requirements, and to allow employees to unionize."

Sources: <https://www.dol.gov/general/topic/discrimination/immdisc>;  
<https://www.aclu.org/other/how-do-labor-laws-apply-immigrants>





According to American Progress, 29% of construction laborers and 19% of carpenters are undocumented. Each year, undocumented workers in the construction industry and their households pay \$12.9 billion in federal tax contributions and \$7.7 billion in state and local taxes. For more information, read the [fact sheet](#). Source for photo: [www.ilr.cornell.edu/](http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/).

Also, immigrants often work many hours, so they don't have time to attend English classes, which means it's hard to get support or protection at work. My husband is undocumented. He works in construction. He is limited in his English which means his opportunities are also limited. He does not get paid as much as others who have work permits, and he does not get paid vacations or bonuses.

### Paying Our Taxes

Some white people think that undocumented immigrants don't pay taxes, but it is not true. We do, and we pay more because sometimes we do not get our refunds. Before I got DACA status, I had an ITIN (Individual Taxpayer Identification Number). I filed taxes with that number, and the tax preparer told us if I had a Social Security number, I would get a full refund since my children are U.S. citizens.

### Discrimination but also Opportunities

Being an undocumented immigrant in the United States is not easy. We face racism and discrimination. We can work for long hours with low pay, and we have few protections on the job. But sadly,

even with all of these difficulties, people live better here than in their native country. If I were in Mexico, I would not have the life that I have now. There are more opportunities here such as having a house, education, and a good quality of life. My kids are growing up bilingual and bicultural and have the chance to have two identities: Mexican and American. It's a better life.

#### AFTER YOU READ:

1. What evidence does the author provide that her family has experienced discrimination?
2. In what ways does she still have a better life here, despite the discrimination?
3. Read the caption under the photo on the upper left. Look up the fact sheet and read about undocumented construction workers.

Miriam Salinas, originally from Mexico, is an ESOL student at Chemeketa Community College in Salem, OR. She currently works as a receptionist at a child abuse assessment center. She wants to continue to grow in her career to help abused kids. She is married with two children.

