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Managing (in) the Shadows of Canadian Schooling: Undocumented Students' Strategic Self-Invisibilization

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how secondary school students with precarious immigration status (often termed "undocumented") in Toronto, Canada, strategically hide aspects of themselves to avoid scrutiny and potential legal and social jeopardy. Drawing on 15 in-depth interviews conducted between 2022 and 2024 with precarious-status youth aged 16 to 25, we highlight how students avoid academic excellence and extracurricular activities and choose not to seek academic supports when needed or to participate in discussions about social justice and immigration in order to remain "invisible" in school. These findings challenge the view of such avoidance as passive, instead revealing a sophisticated form of "self-invisibilization" exercised by students navigating state-induced precarity. Foregrounding students' critical agency in the face of contradictory systems of monitoring and neglect, this article underscores the urgent need for policy reforms and the development of professional practices that acknowledge and support the complex realities of precarious-status youth in Canadian schools.

Keywords*:* schooling, immigration, undocumented youth, non-status immigrants, youth, exclusion, invisibility

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article examine la manière dont des élèves du secondaire ayant un statut d'immigration précaire (souvent désignés comme étant « sans statut ») à Toronto, au Canada, dissimulent stratégiquement certains aspects d'eux-mêmes afin d'éviter d'attirer l'attention et de s'exposer à d'éventuelles conséquences juridiques et sociales. S'appuyant sur 15 entretiens approfondis menés entre 2022 et 2024 auprès de jeunes âgés de 16 à 25 ans ayant un statut d'immigration précaire, l'article montre

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comment ces élèves évitent de se démarquer sur le plan scolaire et de participer à des activités parascolaires, choisissent de ne pas solliciter de soutien scolaire lorsqu'ils en ont besoin et s'abstiennent de prendre part à des discussions sur la justice sociale et l'immigration afin de demeurer « invisibles » à l'école. Ces résultats remettent en question l'idée selon laquelle ces formes d'évitement seraient passives et mettent plutôt en évidence une forme sophistiquée d'« auto-invisibilisation » mise en œuvre par des élèves qui composent avec une précarité produite par l'État. En mettant au premier plan l'agentivité critique des élèves face à des systèmes contradictoires de surveillance et de négligence, cet article souligne l'urgence de réformes politiques et du développement de pratiques professionnelles qui reconnaissent et prennent en compte les réalités complexes des jeunes ayant un statut d'immigration précaire dans les écoles canadiennes.

Mots-clés *:* scolarisation, immigration, jeunes sans statut, personnes immigrantes sans statut, jeunesse, exclusion, invisibilité

INTRODUCTION

This article explores the experiences of secondary school students with precarious immigration status (SPS)—often termed "undocumented"—in the Greater Toronto Area of Ontario, Canada. Addressing the limited Canadian research on the everyday schooling experiences of SPS, our study offers new insight by identifying and theorizing the agentive strategies of "self-invisibilization" through which these youth manage their safety in school. We highlight how these students avoid academic excellence and extracurricular activities, choose not to seek academic support when needed, and refrain from participating in class discussions about social justice and immigration to remain "invisible" at school.

Students' strategies reflect an awareness of the consequences of visibility within systems characterized by deportability and discretionary exposure. In contexts shaped by surveillance, documentation practices, and uneven protections, standing out can invite scrutiny and questions about immigration status, with perceived risks extending to family members under conditions of legal uncertainty. We argue that SPS' decisions to hide and disengage are sophisticated strategies for self-preservation within carceral institutional logics, even as students exercise critical agency in navigating their safety in schools.

Recent federal estimates suggest that as many as 500,000 undocumented migrants may be living in Canada (Government of Canada, 2024), though counts remain imprecise and estimates vary (Government of Canada, 2022). Although no national data specify how many undocumented children are enrolled in school, these estimates underscore that undocumented and precarious-status families are part of Canada's social fabric, including public institutions such as schools.

People with precarious immigration status occupy a range of temporary, conditional, or unstable legal positions that fall short of secure permanent residency. Precarious status includes undocumented migrants, refugee claimants, temporary residents (such as international students or temporary foreign workers), and individuals with pending, lapsed, or refused applications. Although these categories differ legally, they share common features: time-limited authorization, conditional access to rights and services, and ongoing vulnerability to loss of status and exclusion.

All participants in this study were SPS whose family circumstances reflected these dynamics. Although the Ontario Ministry of Education formally commits to providing schooling regardless of immigration status (Government of Ontario, n.d.), the local enactment of these commitments is uneven. In Toronto—where this study is situated—SPS and their families

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continue to encounter fragmented, inconsistent, or inaccessible supports (Toronto District School Board, n.d.; City of Toronto, n.d.). These gaps shape how SPS experience schooling and navigate safety, belonging, and participation in curricular and extracurricular life.

Based on an offhand comment by a Childhood Arrivals Support and Advocacy program (CASA) client in one of the protocol development meetings (along the lines of "I have to study tonight but I don't want to do too well on the test tomorrow"), the group decided it was important to ask about the ways students avoided being seen. That conversation led to this article, and the complex phenomena of self-hiding as an agentive and yet reactive practice.

Situated within this policy context, this research asks: How does precarious immigration status shape SPS' schooling experiences, and how do students navigate safety in school environments under conditions of legal uncertainty? In particular, the analysis attends to the educational, social, and emotional trade-offs that SPS make as they strategically manage visibility, participation, and belonging within institutions that offer formal access to schooling while providing uneven and discretionary protections. In doing so, this study addresses a significant gap in Canadian scholarship on immigration status and schooling by foregrounding how structural policy shortcomings translate into lived educational constraints.

The literature on immigration and schooling has often treated access to schools (i.e., whether a student can legally attend school) as analytically distinct from student experience (i.e., what happens to students once admitted; Armanyous & Hudson, 2019; Meloni et al., 2017; Villegas, 2017, 2018). This distinction has been useful for documenting legal barriers to enrolment, but it can also obscure how access is lived, negotiated, and constrained within schools after entry. Attending to schooling only at the point of legal access risks overlooking how institutional practices—such as documentation requirements, differential recognition, and restricted opportunities for participation—shape students' everyday educational experiences.

This mixed method project is a collaboration with university researchers, as well as staff and precarious-status clients of a community legal program in Toronto, the Childhood Arrivals Support and Advocacy program (CASA)[1], that offers legal support to SPS. The authors of this article bring a variety of immigration experiences to this work. Dennique is a recently graduated university student and advocate from the Caribbean who navigated a complex immigration history in Canada. Despite her deep connection to Canada, she frequently encountered the question, "Where are you from?"—a question that marked her as perpetually foreign despite her long-term residence and social rootedness. During a period when she lacked a valid passport from either her country of origin or Canada, she experienced a profound sense of administrative erasure, feeling as though her identity was slipping through the cracks of the system. Xun Ril is an Asian scholar of marginality and learning with a background in transnational mobility and newcomer support. She is, problematically, often perceived as the "good" kind of immigrant—a racialized trope critiqued in public discourse and scholarship (see Shukla & Suleyman, 2019). Her experiences crossing physical and ideological borders—from Asia to America, from learning theories to queerness—shape her interest in how identity and recognition are constructed. Arlo is a White scholar of race, education, and inequity, who is a first-generation Canadian. His parents immigrated to Canada from the United States. He received both Canadian and US citizenship, by right. In Canada and the United States, he is typically read by other settlers as "from here" and never asked where he is *really* from.

The article reviews scholarship, outlines theoretical and methodological approaches, presents findings across four domains of self-invisibilization, and concludes with implications.

1 During data collection (2022–2024), CASA was housed within Justice for Children and Youth; it became an independent centre in July 2025 (https://casacentre.ca/about-us/).

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LITERATURE ON SPS INVISIBILITY AND EXCLUSION

Willen's (2005) conceptualization of "ghost children," developed in the context of health care access and legal recognition among children born to undocumented migrant parents in Israel, illustrates how this invisibility is produced and sustained through state practices of selective recognition. Although Willen's analysis is not centred on schooling, the metaphor of ghostliness has since been taken up across migration and education scholarship to describe how children with precarious immigration status remain physically present within institutions while being legally, administratively, or socially unrecognized.

Building on this metaphor of ghostliness, the following section synthesizes interdisciplinary scholarship on legal invisibility, precarious immigration status, and educational exclusion to examine how SPS are rendered unseen within legal, institutional, and school-based systems, while also foregrounding their agentive practices of risk management and self-invisibilization.

Legal Invisibility

The ways in which SPS are seen, not seen, interpolated, understood, defined, and recognized vary based on context, type of status, individual circumstances, social identities, and institutional context (Allerton, 2020; Bhabha, 2011; Villegas, 2017, 2018). Setel et al.'s (2007) seminal global work on legal identity—developed across multiple populations rather than students specifically—demonstrates how lack of registration produces systemic vulnerability, a framework that informs contemporary analyses of migrant legal invisibility. This framework has been foundational for subsequent analyses of migrant legal invisibility, including scholarship focused on children and youth.

Building on these foundations, Bhabha (2011) argues that the invisibility of SPS is not accidental but part of a broader state strategy of selective recognition, in which governments and institutions extend partial rights while withholding full inclusion. While Bhabha's (2011) analysis is not limited to schooling, this framework has been taken up within education scholarship to examine how such selective inclusion operates in school contexts. In educational settings, this selective inclusion creates conditions under which youth may be physically present in schools while remaining institutionally marginalized.

Allerton's (2020) study of precarious-status children in Sabah, Malaysia—though geographically distinct from Canada—offers a transferable conceptual framework for understanding how schools can function as sites of exclusion even when educators express humanitarian concern. She identifies education as a critical arena where recognition is unevenly granted and where institutional constraints can undermine well-intentioned support, and introduces the concept of "humanitarian blindness" to describe how states and institutions may overlook the specific needs of vulnerable populations despite nominal commitments to care (p. 462). Applied to schooling contexts in the literature, this concept helps illuminate how routine institutional requirements—such as documentation for extracurricular participation, school trips, co-op placements, or post-secondary guidance—can inadvertently restrict participation for SPS. As education scholars have noted, such requirements can contribute to patterns of non-participation and withdrawal, reinforcing institutional invisibility even in the absence of overt exclusionary intent.

SPS Exclusion in Canadian Schools

Research from the United States demonstrates that precarious status constrains SPS' educational engagement, mental well-being, and long-term aspirations, particularly in enforcement-heavy political climates (Abrego, 2018; Diaz-Strong, 2021; Gomberg-Muñoz, 2016; Gonzales et al., 2015). During and after the first Trump administration, intensified immigration policing extended into educational spaces, heightening fear among undocumented families and increasing the risks associated with everyday school participation (Woods & Kashen, 2025). Comparative work in the European Union similarly points to gaps in legal recognition and uneven institutional protections (in schools, for instance) for people without secure status (Lafleur & Mescoli,

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2018). Together, this scholarship situates SPS' schooling experiences within broader transnational regimes of bordering, surveillance, and exclusion.

In Canada, research on people without immigration status—and on SPS specifically—remains limited. Community-based organizations, including legal clinics and immigrant-serving agencies, often provide support without requiring proof of status, but these services are unevenly available and rarely embedded within school systems (Meloni et al., 2017; Villegas & Aberman, 2019; Sidhu, 2008). As a result, SPS frequently rely on external organizations rather than schools themselves to navigate legal, educational, and social challenges.

Canadian policy scholarship suggests that formal legal rights to schooling do not guarantee equitable access in practice. Families are often asked to provide documentation that is not legally required but is commonly requested, creating barriers to enrolment and participation (Armanyous & Hudson, 2019). Bureaucratic expectations—such as health card numbers for extracurriculars, travel documents for school trips, and proof of citizenship for registration—assume stable legal status and systematically disadvantage SPS (Villegas, 2017, 2018). Precarious immigration status has also been identified as a social determinant of mental and emotional well-being, helping explain why SPS may disengage from school opportunities even when formally permitted to participate (Kamal & Killian, 2015).

These structural conditions shape the everyday schooling journeys of SPS in concrete ways. At the point of school registration, families may be asked to produce identification or immigration documents that they do not have, creating delays, refusals, or the need to rely on discretion by school staff (Armanyous & Hudson, 2019; Villegas, 2017, 2018). Within classroom settings, studies have documented how SPS avoid leadership roles or high-visibility participation out of concern that questions about family circumstances, documentation, or future plans may surface (Meloni et al., 2017; Villegas & Aberman, 2019).

Research further indicates that when extracurricular and enrichment opportunities arise—such as sports teams requiring health card numbers, overnight trips requiring government-issued identification, or co-op placements requiring legal work authorization—SPS are systematically excluded or opt out, even when academically qualified (Meloni et al., 2017; Villegas, 2017, 2018). Similarly, guidance counselling practices have been shown to assume eligibility for work permits, student loans, and post-secondary pathways, effectively excluding SPS from aspirational narratives made available to their peers (Villegas & Aberman, 2019). In this sense, SPS are often *unanticipated* (Ahmed, 2007), unplanned for, and unsupported within Canadian schools, not because they lack the desire to participate, but because the institutional architecture fails to account for the constraints that shape their daily lives.

Meloni et al. (2017) argue that SPS are made "institutionally invisible," and that access to formal education relies on "unwritten and discretionary practices" (p. 26). Rather than referring to the nation-state abstractly, their analysis highlights how discretionary and inconsistent decisions by institutional actors across immigration, education, health, and social services shape SPS' educational trajectories, sustaining institutional invisibility by making access contingent on individualized judgement rather than guaranteed protections.

In Canada, education falls under provincial jurisdiction, meaning school access and support policies vary by region. In Ontario, while the Ministry of Education articulates commitments to equity and inclusion, SPS often encounter gaps between policy and practice, leaving critical decisions to individual administrators and educators. This governance structure enables institutional invisibility to persist, as SPS' access to schooling becomes contingent on localized interpretation rather than consistent, system-wide protections.

Villegas (2017, 2018) argues that schooling and nation can become metonymic, a framing which sees school access as border-crossing, and school denial as border-guarding; a process through which discursive illegalization occurs (see also García, 2017; Pratt & Thompson, 2008). Villegas and Aberman (2019) document SPS' fears of deportation, interactions with school authorities, and separation from family in Ontario, noting the ways in which racism

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combines with questions of status to inhibit SPS' post-secondary access. Students reported avoiding guidance counsellors due to questions about citizenship, eligibility for provincial student aid (OSAP), or work authorization, and described being discouraged from applying to college or university due to assumptions about legal ineligibility. Taken together, these dynamics reveal how institutional invisibility operates as a downstream manifestation of legal invisibility, shaping SPS' educational trajectories and sense of belonging.

Toward Agentive Self-Invisibilization

Across multiple contexts, scholars emphasize that SPS powerfully grapple with legal and institutional invisibility by engaging in subtle forms of agency (Abrego, 2018; Gonzales et al., 2015; Villegas & Aberman, 2019). Within this literature, governance is understood as operating across multiple levels, including immigration authorities, education ministries, and school-level administrative practices that collectively regulate recognition and access (Bhabha, 2011; Meloni et al., 2017). Rather than attributing these processes to a monolithic "state," scholars point to the dispersed and layered nature of power through which inclusion and exclusion are enacted in everyday institutional settings.

Building on these studies, invisibility can be understood as a bifurcated set of processes: structural (legal and institutional), produced through legal regimes and institutional arrangements that limit recognition and rights (Bhabha, 2011; Meloni et al., 2017; Allerton, 2020); and agentive, enacted through students' efforts to manage visibility, risk, and participation within these constraints. Existing studies document that students may avoid authority figures, downplay academic achievement, or withdraw from programs requiring documentation (Villegas & Aberman, 2019; Allerton, 2020), but these practices are typically framed as diffuse coping responses rather than patterned, domain-specific strategies across secondary school contexts. This study extends the literature by identifying four recurring domains of strategic self-invisibilization and demonstrating how they function as structured forms of risk management within Canadian schooling. While such strategies may support short-term safety, scholars caution that they can simultaneously constrain belonging, participation, and long-term educational possibility (Bhabha, 2011; Meloni et al., 2017).

Writing in the Canadian context, Meloni (2023) observes the liminal legal status of SPS creates "a condition of hardship and suspension" in which young people struggle to anchor themselves within educational institutions (p. 9). Yet, even within these constrained conditions, the literature shows that SPS continue to negotiate the terms of their participation in school life, with self-invisibilization functioning simultaneously as a protective response to structural exclusion and as a constrained form of agency (Bhabha, 2011; Meloni et al., 2017).

Theoretical Orientations

This study is guided by critical engagements with state-induced precarity, racialized legal status, and ambivalence, particularly as they shape the educational lives of SPS. Rather than reiterating questions of formal school access, this framework foregrounds how conditions of access—including practices of recognition and misrecognition, differential participation, and discretionary decision making—structure what schooling affords SPS once they are admitted. In this sense, access is understood not only as entry into school, but as access to the broader promises of education, such as stable futures, social mobility, post-secondary pathways, and full participation in school life.

Building on Butler's (2016) theorization of precarity as a politically and socially produced condition, this study understands SPS' educational experiences as shaped by structural unfreedom, in which access to schooling unfolds through ongoing negotiation, risk assessment, and constraint rather than secure inclusion. Building on Meloni's (2023) analysis of status precarity as dynamic and relational, this framework understands precarity as produced not only through formal legal classification but also through the discretionary decisions of actors across immigration, education, and social service systems. In this sense, precarity is both state-induced (Butler, 2016; Menjívar, 2021) and state-managed, sustained through uneven

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enforcement, surveillance, and partial inclusion rather than outright exclusion.

At the same time, this analysis draws on scholarship that conceptualizes nation-state bordering practices as race- and class-making regimes (Asad & Clair, 2018; Menjívar, 2021; Walia, 2021). Asad and Clair (2018) theorize "racialized legal status" to capture how ostensibly race-neutral legal classifications disproportionately impact racialized and low-income communities (p. 20), while Menjívar (2021) demonstrates how illegality is both legally and socially constructed, allowing racism to operate through formally colour-blind law. As Walia (2021) succinctly notes, "the law constructs illegality while racism constructs the illegal" (p. 12). Together, these perspectives inform a theoretical framing in which immigration status is never only legal but is lived through racialization, surveillance, and unequal assumptions about belonging, deservingness, and futurity—conditions that shape how SPS experience and navigate schooling in Canada.

Finally, this study draws on Meloni's (2023) theorization of ambivalence in interpreting how SPS navigate uncertain educational realities. Ambivalence is understood first as a structural condition in which institutions simultaneously extend partial inclusion (e.g., allowing school attendance) while withholding full participation (e.g., restricting mobility, work authorization, or extracurricular access). This structural ambivalence produces lived ambivalence, as students continuously negotiate between aspirations for belonging and the imperative of safety. In this sense, ambivalence is not only a survival strategy, but a condition that produces strategic responses, including self-invisibilization, through which SPS manage risk within systems that "hijack rights because of the precarious status of the rights holder" (Bhabha, 2011, p. 10).

In conclusion, the existing literature on precarious immigration status and schooling has generated important insights into legal and institutional invisibility, discretionary governance, and educational exclusion. However, several limitations remain. First, while scholars have documented forms of protective self-management and constrained agency among SPS (Abrego, 2018; Gonzales et al., 2015; Meloni et al., 2017), these practices are often discussed as secondary consequences of exclusion rather than examined as patterned, agentive strategies through which students actively negotiate visibility and safety in everyday school life. The second gap is the overemphasis on legal invisibility (Setel et al., 2007; Willen, 2005), which narrows the scope of research to the immediate consequences of lacking documentation, such as restricted access to services, ultimately offering a narrow understanding of access (Villegas, 2017, 2018). Finally, there remains limited empirical attention to how Canadian educational systems—particularly at the secondary level—function as sites where these dynamics are produced, managed, and sometimes mitigated, as well as to how educators' discretionary practices shape SPS' experiences of belonging, participation, and future possibility (Armanyous & Hudson, 2019; Meloni et al., 2017; Villegas & Aberman, 2019).

METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

Findings presented here are drawn from a qualitative interview study examining the schooling experiences of school-involved or recently school-involved youth with precarious immigration status in and around Toronto. The project was developed in partnership with university-based researchers and the Childhood Arrivals Support and Advocacy program (CASA), which specializes in legal advocacy for precarious-status youth.

The interview protocol was developed collaboratively by university researchers, CASA staff, and CASA clients through a series of iterative meetings. The protocol included demographic questions and open-ended prompts designed to elicit participants' schooling experiences, perceptions of inclusion and safety, decisions around participation and visibility, and post-secondary planning under conditions of precarious immigration status. Example questions included: "Would you say your status impacted your ability to register for school? If yes, why, and how?"; and "Have concerns regarding people finding out about your status impacted your learning overall in high school?" The full interview protocol is included in Appendix A.

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Participants and Data Collection

We interviewed 15 precarious-status young people. Participants selected one or both forms of participation depending on availability and perceived safety. Youth under age 18 were enrolled in high school at the time of participation, while those over 18 were primarily recent high school graduates. Participants ranged in age from 16 to 25, and all resided in the Greater Toronto Area. Recruitment occurred exclusively through CASA to protect participant confidentiality and minimize risk.

Interviews were conducted between 2023 and 2024. Participants were physically present at CASA offices, accompanied by their caseworkers and/or legal counsel, and connected with researchers remotely via Zoom. For safety and privacy, interviews were audio-only; participants kept Zoom cameras turned off, and no video recordings were made. Researchers participated from a separate location and had no direct contact with participants outside CASA-mediated communication. Interviews lasted approximately 40–60 minutes. Audio recordings were destroyed after transcripts were reviewed and verified to reduce legal and safety risks associated with data retention.

A demographic summary of participants—including age, schooling status, gender identity, and racial identity—is presented in Table 1.

The interview format values the centrality of experiential knowledge and recognizes the subject as a custodian of relevant experiential knowledge (Bernal, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2000). This is a tenet of critical research and analysis. Chang et al. (2019) argue for research approaches that offer "insight into the complex obstacles undocumented students face." (p. 2). Open-ended questions allow for this within a critical frame, and are inclusive of storytelling

Table 1
Demographic Information of the Individual Participants

Interviewee	Ethnic Identity	Age	Gender
Carlo	Caribbean	24	Male
Mac	South Asian	21	Male
Hanna	Somali	16	Female
Kai	Afro-Caribbean	19	Cis Male
Lauren	Middle Eastern	18	Female
Lilly	Middle Eastern	17	Female
Lisa	Indo-Guyanese	18	Female
M	East Asian & West African	17	Female
Maria	Middle Eastern	19	Female
Natalia	Afro-Brazilian	23	Female
Nathan	Black	19	Male
Sally	Black, Caribbean descent	20	Female
Shelly	Black	25	Female
Sophia	White	20	Female
Valentine	Black, Jamaican	18	Female

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(Lewis-Beck et al., 2004) and counter-story-telling (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). This approach creates space for the nuance and complexity needed to understand the operations of agency and invisibility in schooling, and the myriad intersections with race, language, precarity, and class.

Data Analysis

As a qualitative project, the data analysis and the presentation of data in this article reflect an analytical integration of interview. Following transcription, we used iterative thematic analysis, understood here as a recursive process of repeated reading, coding, discussion, and refinement of themes across the dataset (Ryan & Bernard, 2003), to highlight key meta-themes in the interviews (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Coding was conducted collectively, with theoretical commitments shaping the development of the codebook and interpretation of emerging themes.

The Childhood Arrivals Support and Advocacy program's involvement in the research extended into interpretation: Dennique's dual role as both CASA staff member and researcher contributed practitioner insight, community accountability, and contextual sensitivity to analytic decisions. Themes were refined through repeated discussion among authors, ensuring consistency and reflexive engagement with power, positionality, and participant safety.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

While scholarship has often described SPS as rendered invisible within institutional systems, the findings presented here show that invisibility is not synonymous with immobility. As participants' narratives reveal, students actively manage visibility through deliberate practices of withdrawal, silence, and strategic underperformance. In this sense, *ghosts make moves*: SPS remain present within schools while carefully navigating when, how, and to what extent they are seen. The sections that follow identify four domains of self-invisibilization in Canadian secondary schools, reframing withdrawal and silence as patterned responses to institutional risk rather than disengagement.

Qualitative interview data suggest that students were consistently concerned with being "found out" at school. Participants described actively trying not to stand out, limiting visibility in classrooms and school spaces, and carefully managing interactions with peers and staff to reduce the risk of exposure. These concerns manifested in four domains of student self-invisibilization practices at school: (1) avoiding academic excellence, (2) avoiding extracurricular activities, (3) not seeking academic supports when needed, and (4) avoiding discussions about social justice and immigration. These avoidances may powerfully undermine academic achievement and personal growth.

Avoiding Academic Excellence

A recurring theme in the interview data was the deliberate avoidance of academic excellence among SPS, who refrain from excelling or contributing to class discussions out of fear of unwanted attention and scrutiny. For many participants, being "noticed" in school carried perceived risks, including increased scrutiny from authority figures, questions about documentation, or the possibility of information being shared in ways that could impact their family's legal safety.

Comments from Carlo[2] (a 24-year-old Black Caribbean man), and Mac (a 21-year-old South Asian man) illustrate how they purposefully held back in class to avoid drawing attention. Carlo explained, "I try not to bring attention to myself. Like, just try to keep a low profile and stay in the middle." Similarly, Mac's self-determined academic invisibility served as a strategy to avoid unwanted attention: "I have an answer for it, but I couldn't really raise my hand and speak about it." In Mac's case, rather than a choice, this self-invisibilization seems more like a necessity—he simply "couldn't" engage due to the potential risks tied to his precarious status.

Carlo's deliberate decision to "stay in the middle" and Mac's need to stay silent despite knowing the answer underscore the self-regu-

2 All names of participants quoted in this article are pseudonyms, and identifying details have been altered to protect participant confidentiality.

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lation students impose on themselves. These practices exemplify Meloni et al.'s (2017) conception of "institutional invisibility" (p. 16), where students adopt a passive stance to avoid scrutiny (see also Villegas & Aberman, 2019). In this sense, participants' avoidance of academic distinction reflects not disengagement or lack of ability, but a protective strategy shaped by the real and perceived consequences of being seen within systems that do not fully guarantee their safety.

The consequences of this tendency to hide are evident when students deliberately self-sabotage. Sally (a 20-year-old Black Caribbean woman) shared, "I ended up kind of doing less work, to the point I didn't submit one of my final assignments just because I wanted to keep my grade at a reasonable level." Similarly, Valentine (an 18-year-old Black Caribbean woman) explains: "I decided to...fail on purpose. So I would get—let's say I would get a 90 in math, but I would fail like, a few tests, and now my grades are like 60 to 70." These accounts illustrate self-protective underperformance, where students intentionally limit their visibility to avoid attention from teachers or peers (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015; Wahlström Smith, 2018). Ethnographic research with undocumented children in Sweden demonstrates that such fears are not merely imagined: children actively manage exposure in school and community settings to avoid detection, deportability, and potential state intervention, often engaging in deliberate invisibility as a survival strategy. Within this context, Sally's and Valentine's strategic underachievement reflects a rational response to perceived institutional risk, extending Wahlström Smith's (2018) findings on how undocumented youth regulate behaviour to remain unnoticed. While our data do not systematically map participants' "circles of care," several narratives suggest that decisions about hiding and underperforming were shaped through informal guidance from peers, family members, and trusted adults, indicating that these strategies were embedded in relational networks of advice, caution, and survival.

By "staying in the middle," Carlo exerts his agency in determining his academic visibility. Valentine's case also highlights a unique form of agency within unfreedom (Butler, 2016; Meloni, 2023), where students make deliberate choices to fail as a means of self-protection. This underperformance is an act of self-preservation in an environment where visibility can mean vulnerability. In this way, SPS may disengage academically as a result of the legal and social liminality—or "legal limbo" (Gonzales, 2016)—they experience. Allerton's (2020) notion of humanitarian blindness (describing the state's selective non-recognition of vulnerable populations, wherein systems of care—such as education—turn a blind eye to the specific needs of these individuals) helps us understand these students' experiences. Importantly, this blindness does not rest solely on individual teachers' awareness or intent—educators may be unaware of a student's status or constrained by institutional workload, policy limits, and resource pressures—but rather reflects broader structural conditions that leave SPS' needs systematically unattended. In the context of academic achievement, SPS' reluctance to participate fully or excel academically is not just a personal choice but an outcome of the conditions imposed by educational systems and legal frameworks, which function to keep these students in a state of invisibility.

Avoiding Extracurricular Engagement

Many SPS avoid participating in extracurricular activities for reasons similar to those shaping their academic self-invisibilization: fear of exposure, documentation requirements, and the desire to stay under the radar. In his interview, Carlo explained his choice to withdraw from school activities in response to institutional paperwork requirements rather than personal preference: "I ain't going on tours and stuff like that, when they're asking for certain paperwork that you can't provide, then it can be a bit of a problem." In this case, non-participation is less a voluntary decision than a practical response to barriers that make participation feel unsafe or impossible. The need to present documentation like health cards or proof of status makes participation in these activities risky, leading students to avoid them altogether, echoing Gonzales's (2016) findings on undocumented youth missing out on educational and extracurricular opportunities due to their legal vulnerabi-

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lities. Over time, exclusion from these activities can deepen feelings of isolation and marginalization, as SPS are barred from fully engaging in school life.

Similarly, Shelly's (a 25-year-old Black woman) avoidance of extracurricular activities and social events demonstrates how self-censorship can lead to social reclusion. When describing the "small things" she could not do due to her status, she explains,

> The fact that I wasn't able to really join extracurricular activities, or even just being able to go out on the weekend and stuff like that. You're at the age where all your friends want you to hang out with them on the weekend or after school, things like that I couldn't do.

By not participating, Shelly missed opportunities to build the kind of relationships her peers were forming, making her feel alienated from the social fabric of the school. This powerfully echoes Abrego's (2018) discussion of how self-censorship and avoidance strategies isolate SPS, making it difficult for them to develop peer networks and support systems.

We learn of similar exclusions in Valentine's retrospective account of missing a school trip and sitting alone in class: "I was excluded out of a trip because they needed, like, a health card and I didn't have it. So, at that time, I felt bummed out, because I was literally the only one in the class." Valentine's exclusion from a school trip due to her inability to provide a health card further illustrates how legal and administrative requirements—not individual choice—can function as structural barriers to extracurricular participation. She describes feeling "bummed out" as the only student unable to go, a moment that intensified her sense of difference and social isolation. Valentine's experience echoes Suárez-Orozco et al.'s (2015) findings on social and academic invisibility, wherein SPS are excluded from opportunities others take for granted, limiting social integration and personal growth, while also illustrating the impacts of precarity on youth well-being documented by Kamal and Killian (2015).

When prompted to share additional insights about attending school with precarious status, Lisa (an 18-year-old Indo-Guyanese woman) reflects how the legal document requirements—signalling who can and cannot participate—limits SPS' ability to socialize and engage with peers. Speaking both from her own experience and in reference to other students in similar situations, she explains:

> When you're limited from participating, I feel like—for example, if someone was not in the same position as I was or if someone does not have the same values as I do, I feel like it could be very difficult for them to socialize, especially if they're more introverted. And then it would be harder for them to just participate in class, it would be harder for them to take up extracurriculars.

Lisa's comment suggests that participation barriers affect students unevenly: While some SPS may find ways to cope, others—particularly those who are more introverted or lack supportive peer networks—may experience deeper social withdrawal and reduced engagement.

Gonzales's (2016) analysis is relevant here regarding the ways in which SPS' exclusion from full participation in school life has long-term consequences on their sense of belonging. For participants in this study, missing extracurricular activities and shared school experiences limited opportunities to build peer relationships, confidence, and social connection. As Lisa notes, documentation barriers can narrow students' ability to socialize or participate, while Carlo's and Valentine's accounts illustrate how exclusion from trips and activities can reduce access to shared experiences that support belonging and engagement.

Reluctance to Seek Academic Supports

Students with precarious immigration status often feared that disclosing their academic struggles or asking for help might lead to questions about their status, or that they would be treated differently if their status became known. This avoidance of seeking support is particularly troubling as it suggests fears of disclosure can lead to academic disadvantages, as students may feel unable to access the resources they need to succeed. Literature suggests that SPS

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often avoid institutional support, fearing that accepting support might lead to exposure or negative judgement (Abrego, 2018; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015). Despite their legitimate and common educational needs, these students choose to avoid teachers and administrators. This can have serious implications for their access to resources and support in school, highlighting the operations of SPS institutional invisibility (Meloni et al., 2017).

Shelly offers a specific reason for her reluctance to seek support: the lack of trust in school authorities, particularly administrators. She explains: "I stayed clear of [principals and vice-principals]… I know immigration [authorities] isn't allowed to enter schools. But you just never really know." Despite knowing that immigration authorities are technically not allowed to enter schools, her fear of exposure is so pervasive (and well-founded) that she does not feel entirely safe, even in these supposedly protected environments. This distrust extends beyond individual educators to the institution itself. While Figueroa (2017) and Suárez-Orozco et al. (2015) document fear and silence, we show how, in Canadian secondary schools, these become patterned withdrawals across academic, extracurricular, and political domains—structured safety strategies rather than mere fear-based silence.

The reluctance of SPS to seek support from teachers and school administrators underscores how the schooling system, through unclear policies, discretionary documentation practices, and inconsistent protections, perpetuates a manufactured condition of fear. In Ontario, while access to schooling is formally guaranteed regardless of immigration status, there is limited explicit guidance on confidentiality, documentation requests, or protections tailored to SPS, leaving students uncertain about the risks of disclosure. This fear stems not just from a scarcity of supports but from the scrutiny and potential exposure that accessing help could bring. Practices of avoidance reflect a broader structural vulnerability where students disengage from critical resources to protect themselves and their families. Precarious status is shaped by fixed legal structures and the discretionary power of institutional actors, producing conditions in which invisibility becomes a perceived strategy for safety. At the same time, some SPS rely on trusted teachers, settlement workers, or community legal organizations for confidential guidance, pointing to the importance of strengthening school–community partnerships that allow students to seek support without increasing risk.

Avoiding Conversations about Social Justice and Immigration

The interview data further flesh out this cautious behaviour, with participants illustrating how deeply embedded these self-protective strategies are in their daily interactions. For instance, Kai (a 19-year-old Afro-Caribbean man) highlighted the internalized fear of exposure that prevents him from participating in class discussions:

> In relation to status, me personally, I feel like if there was a class discussion I would not—I wouldn't participate… hearing a lot of the responses from a lot of the students in the lecture, it just kind of made me choose not to say anything because it would have—it would require for me to go so in-depth about myself that I just don't feel comfortable sharing.

Kai's example reflects the difficulty of balancing personal perspectives with the fear of self-disclosure. This fear is not only about the direct topic at hand but also the potential it has to unveil deeper, personal information about precarious status. This powerfully illustrates Abrego's (2018) argument that self-censorship among undocumented youth often arises as a survival tactic to avoid scrutiny.

Similarly, Lisa's experience reveals how the fear of exposure is silencing during contentious discussions. She explains:

> I feel like sometimes when some persons get very opinionated about immigration, then I would just draw back because I just felt like I just didn't have the right to say anything. And then if I did say anything, it will probably be biased or probably throw me into the spotlight, which I didn't want to like, have to delve into that conversation.

In Lisa's case, avoidance reflects not only concern about revealing her status but also an-

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ticipation of being judged, misread, or misinterpreted while placed under heightened attention. Her decision to remain silent mirrors Menjívar's (2021) findings that undocumented youth often withdraw from political or immigration-related discussions to avoid becoming targets of scrutiny.

These accounts illustrate how classroom discussions about immigration and social justice become sites of heightened risk for SPS. These dynamics reflect institutional and structural ambivalence (Bhabha, 2011; Meloni, 2023), wherein students are formally included in schools yet lack the social, legal, and psychological safety to participate fully in sensitive conversations. In this sense, self-censorship is not merely an individual communication choice but a patterned response to environments in which speaking may carry personal or familial risk. This helps explain how what Allerton (2020) terms "humanitarian blindness"—the institutional tendency to overlook the specific vulnerabilities of marginalized populations—can translate into everyday classroom silences. Within these conditions, SPS self-invisibilize as a pragmatic safety practice, remaining present in educational spaces while strategically limiting their visibility.

The key findings from our study shed light on the multifaceted experiences of SPS in schools, offering a deeper understanding of the mechanics and consequences of state-induced precarity (Butler, 2016). These findings extend the limited existing research on this topic in Canada, revealing how precarious status shapes students' school lives, particularly through the concepts of invisibility and invisibilization, or as participants often described it, "hiding." While some participants are now older, the ages reported in this study reflect their age at the time of interview, and their accounts centre on retrospective reflections of their K–12 schooling experiences under conditions of precarious legal status.

LIMITATIONS

Several limitations shape the interpretation of these findings. In addition to sample size (which necessitates a caution against generalizations based on the findings), sample composition was limited to self-selected CASA clients and is not representative. Additionally, findings must be carefully contextualized in terms of time, a matter that bears somewhat uniquely here given potential policy changes and the precarity of participants. Finally, ethical and safety considerations limited opportunities for prolonged engagement or follow-up with participants, shaping both data collection and analytic scope.

Implications and Significance for Teaching, Policy, and Research

Schools often become sites where social, legal, and institutional borders are constructed and reinforced, limiting SPS' full participation. There thus arises a need to examine the roles that educators, school staff, and institutional policies play in sustaining these borders, as well as the partial inclusion these students experience. Education workers play a powerful, often unacknowledged role in shaping the nature, quality, and degree of inclusion and participation available to students facing economic, racial, or immigration-status marginalization (Kempf, 2024). Recognizing this incredibly important yet often hidden work of formal education, schools must identify the liminal operations of status and develop policies that allow fulsome access and participation for all students, regardless of (and regarding) immigration status. By removing barriers to full inclusion, schools can begin to address the structural inequities that keep precarious-status students on the margins of academic and social life.

Teachers and schools should shift from passive roles, where they unconsciously reinforce exclusion, to active agents of change that advocate for SPS. This requires a critical re-evaluation of practices such as documentation requirements, including Ontario Ministry of Education and school-board policies that currently lack explicit guidance on confidentiality, documentation limits, and protections for students without secure status, as well as creating inclusive spaces where all students can thrive without fear of exposure. Teacher training to recognize and dismantle exclusion and invisibility is a necessary step toward fostering a more just, liberatory and humanizing education system. This is impossible without critical conversations of borders and bordering practices at the discur-

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sive and curricular levels, which complement critical conversations about race, colonialism, White supremacy, and other issues relevant to educational justice in Canada. This also means thinking bravely and out loud about the values and commitments expected of educators, particularly in relation to equity, human rights, and anti-racist practice. While immigration policy is a legitimate political debate, educators who hold anti-immigrant views risk undermining the safety, dignity, and educational access of precarious-status students, whose protection is an ethical responsibility of public schooling.

Research plays an important role in advancing SPS' access and inclusion. Although scholarship on precarious-status youth is expanding, Canadian research remains limited, and cross-national comparative work is still underdeveloped. Studies from Europe, the United States, and Southeast Asia (e.g., Allerton, 2020; Bhabha, 2011; Wahlström Smith, 2018) offer valuable insights, but further comparative analysis could clarify how invisibility and exclusion operate across legal and policy contexts. Future research should continue examining student agency, institutional responsibility, and the role of community-based supports—such as legal clinics and school–community partnerships—in helping SPS navigate risk and belonging.

This study highlights the inequities SPS face in Canadian schools, where formal access does not ensure full participation, recognition, or safety. Rather than framing invisibility as an individual deficit, the findings reveal the structural conditions that compel SPS to manage risk through silence, withdrawal, and self-limitation. Addressing these inequities requires coordinated shifts in policy, pedagogy, and research so that schools move beyond partial inclusion toward environments where precarious-status students are not only present, but meaningfully supported and able to thrive.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Protocol for the Educational Experiences of Youth with Precarious Immigration Status in the Greater Toronto Area

Note to Reader

This semi-structured interview protocol was used flexibly. Not all questions were asked of all participants. Interviewers followed the sequence below while remaining responsive to participant comfort, safety, and relevance. Follow-up prompts were used as needed. Trigger warnings were provided prior to sensitive sections.

Stage 1: Introduction and Informed Context

Introduce the purpose of the study, explain voluntary participation, review consent, and describe data storage, confidentiality, and safety measures. Invite questions before beginning.

Stage 2: Current Schooling Status

1. Are you in school now? If so, what grade? If not, what are you doing these days?

2. Would you say your status impacted your ability to register for school? If yes, why, and how?

Stage 3: Learning About Immigration Status in School

3. What were you taught about the rights of people with precarious immigration status in school?

Prompts (if needed):
- » In what classes?
- » How did that feel?

Specific probe: Civics and Careers
(These classes talk about government and post-high-school planning, e.g., resume writing.)
- » Did these classes include conversations and/or activities about individuals with different statuses?
  - If yes, did that make you feel included? Can you give examples?
  - If no, would you have felt more included if there were course topics or activities related to status?
  - If no, do you have ideas about how these courses could have been more inclusive to students with precarious status?

Additional prompts:
- » Course topics about navigating adulthood with different statuses (e.g., getting a job, SIN, understanding government in relation to status).

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4. Did/do you feel that teachers in your school had an understanding of precarious status, and/or how it may impact students?

Follow-up prompts:
- » Principals and/or vice principals?
- » Administrators?
- » Peers?

Stage 4: Connections, Safety, and Inclusion at School

5. How would you say your status affected your ability to connect with:

- » Teachers?
- » Guidance counsellors?
- » Vice principals and principals?
- » Administrative staff?
- » Peers?

6. Who in your school did/have you told about your status?

Prompts:
- » Teachers
- » Friends
- » Guidance counsellors
- » Administrators
- » Vice principals / principals

7. Have you felt you needed to be dishonest about your status with:

- » Teachers?
- » Guidance counsellors?
- » Vice principals and principals?
- » Peers?

Prompt:
- » Related “fibs” (e.g., not going out, not going to university)

8. Do you think your status impacts the degree to which you participated in or felt included in school?

- » With peers?
- » In the classroom?
- » In extracurricular activities?
- » On school trips?

9. Have concerns regarding people finding out about your status impacted your learning overall in high school?

10. (Ask only if needed as a follow-up to the previous question.)

11. Have you felt the need to avoid participation in school clubs, teams, and/or events in order to avoid drawing attention to your status?

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12. Have you felt the need to avoid outstanding athletic achievement in order to avoid drawing attention to your status?

13. Do you feel your status has impacted your ability to share your political opinions or engage in conversations about social justice?

14. Generally, have you felt the need to avoid standing out at school in order to avoid drawing attention to your status?

Stage 5: Identity, Silence, and Intersectionality

Invite reflection on race, gender, and status intersections. Follow participant cues carefully.

15. Have you had to downplay your racial, ethnic, or cultural identity, or gender identity in order to avoid drawing attention to your status? Please explain.

Follow-up:
» Did you ever feel you needed to stay silent in class on these or related issues?

16. Did/do you feel you can be yourself at school?

Stage 6: Course Selection and Academic Pathways

17. How have you decided which courses to take?

18. How did you come to the decision to take certain courses and/or levels of courses?

19. Have you felt influenced by school staff (e.g., teachers, guidance counsellors) to take certain courses and/or levels of courses?

20. Have your courses been academic, college, workplace, or open?

21. Do you feel the level of courses you have taken and/or are taking meet the requirements for your post-secondary destination and career goals?

Stage 7: Learning About Immigration Status

Trigger warning provided before beginning this section.

22. Can you please tell us about when you first learned about your status?

Prompts:
» Grade
» Age

23. Can you please tell us about how you felt when you learned about your immigration status?

24. Did learning about your status affect your perception of what was possible for your future? How? Why? In what way?

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Stage 8: Plans After High School

25. Did you see yourself represented in school discussions about post-secondary options?

26. Did the information provided address issues relevant to you or meet your needs?

27. For in-school participants: What are your plans after high school?

28. For out-of-school participants: Has your status impacted your planning for next steps after high school?

29. For post-school participants only: When you were in high school, what did you plan to do after graduation?

Follow-up:
- » Did these plans materialize?
- » Did your status play a role?

30. For participants not currently in school: When did you leave school? Why did you leave school?

31. What made you feel included in schooling? Specifically.

32. What could teachers, guidance counsellors, peers, and schools do differently? (Ask separately for each group.)

33. How do you think things would be different if you were not dealing with status? For your experience? Your goals? What is your dream for the future?

Stage 9: Post-Secondary Experiences (University/College Participants Only)

34. Has anything shifted for you as you went (or are going) through your first year of university in relation to your status?

Prompts:
- » Feelings of representation
- » Awareness of others with precarious status
- » Inclusion and safety

35. Do you feel you can safely participate in class discussions or share your opinion on certain topics?

Prompt:
- » Political views (e.g., racial justice, immigration policies)

36. Do you feel you are able to participate in post-secondary extracurricular activities?

Prompt:
- » University or college clubs
- » Orientation or “freshman week”

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37. Has your status affected your ability to connect with people in post-secondary settings?

Prompt:
- » Professors
- » Teaching assistants
- » Peers

38. Are there specific spaces or practices within your university or college that make you feel included despite your status? Can these be implemented within high schools?

39. If not, do you think there is anything that could be implemented in post-secondary spaces to make people with precarious status feel more included and safe?

Stage 10: Demographics and Wrap-Up

40. How do you identify racially?

41. How do you identify in terms of gender? (e.g., cis man, trans, nonbinary, woman)

42. How old are you?

43. In Canada, did/do you attend school primarily in French or English?

44. Did you speak that language at home growing up?

45. Were you financially secure during high school?

46. If currently in school, are you financially secure now?

47. Is there anything you would like to add that we might have missed?

Alternative prompt:
- » Are there other ways status affected your high school experience that we did not ask about?
- » Any other ways your status made you feel unsafe or disconnected at school?

Interviewer Reminder: Reiterate confidentiality, explain how the data will be used, and thank the participant.

48. Do you have any questions for us?

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