

## APA AWARD

Award for Distinguished Early Career Contributions to  
Psychology in the Public Interest: Germán A. Cadenas**Citation**

“The 2025 Award for Distinguished Early Career Contributions to Psychology in the Public Interest is bestowed on Germán A. Cadenas in recognition of his tangible impact and influence on policy and the lives of undocumented individuals. Through numerous influential reports, disseminated through both academic and community channels, his scholarship has played a crucial role in workforce development and direct intervention programs aimed at undocumented communities. His scholarship has been cited in federal court cases protecting humanitarian parole programs. His work exemplifies a profound commitment to advancing liberation and social justice. He has been instrumental in advancing the science of critical consciousness. As a scientist-practitioner-advocate, Cadenas’s research is public facing and has shaped advocacy priorities that have direct legal implications for immigration policy and the millions of people they affect. Cadenas strives to promote a positive public impact in a way that is unique and exemplary of the best of psychology.”

**Biography**

The seeds to becoming a publicly engaged psychologist started early in Mérida, a small and peaceful city in the

Venezuelan Andes. My love for education came from the guidance and care I received from my grandmother, Ada, who was a retired schoolteacher. Resilience and determination were taught by my loving parents, whose hard work and creativity were limited by growing economic precarity. The university was the cultural engine of the city, and I grew up admiring the activism of its students who were consistent in speaking truth to power. It was in this environment that I became interested in human behavior and mental health as shaped by social challenges. I left Venezuela at age 15 as the country descended into a prolonged crisis that forced millions to become global sojourners.

Migrating to the United States with my family as a young person colored how I understand the world. Arriving in Arizona represented the promise of refuge and opportunity for us to stay together, albeit having no status due to outdated policies. This made me the target of anti-immigrant xenophobia and racism. State laws were approved to limit access to higher education, health care, social services, and work for undocumented immigrants, while authorities repeatedly raided Latinx neighborhoods. I felt a sense of sanctuary from fear when learning at school, the community college, and later Arizona State University. Thanks to a private scholarship named the American Dream Fund, I met other Sun Devils who were also undocumented. We decided to step out of the shadows to advocate for the national Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act. I also became involved in peaceful organizing to resist SB1070, the “show me your papers” law, allowing police to racially profile to inquire about immigration status. Unfortunately, the DREAM Act did not become federal law, and SB1070 lingered. We lost. However, becoming involved in grassroots activism around these public causes was transformational. I found a sense of purpose, belonging, love, and healing. These experiences would eventually inform my research program to advance two interconnected lines: (a) the psychology of immigration in the context of social change and (b) intervention strategies to promote the well-being of immigrants and other minoritized groups.

I wanted to understand the psychology of activism, perhaps in hopes of unlocking some secret human mechanism to bolster democracy. I became the first publicly undocumented immigrant admitted to a PhD program in Arizona, the APA-

accredited counseling psychology program at Arizona State University. Studying at the doctoral level felt like a genuine dream come true. It was there that I started to develop a scholar–activist identity, learning how to blend rigorous academic scholarship and vigorous community engagement. The research I was conducting was enhanced by community advocacy and vice versa. Along the way, I had the chance to adjust my status and eventually became a U.S. citizen. I was also elected to graduate student leadership positions, advocating for a policy to provide in-state tuition for youth protected by the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals. Victoriously, that policy went into effect in 2015.

The movement for immigrant rights inspired my dissertation. I examined how Latinx immigrant Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals students leveraged their activism to promote a sense of social change agency and their educational persistence (Cadenas, Bernstein, & Tracey, 2018). I integrated Paulo Freire’s seminal concept of critical consciousness with social cognitive career theory to examine the pathways between students’ reflection of oppression, activist behaviors, self-efficacy, outcome expectations, social supports, and status in promoting college persistence. I was also involved in creating DREAMzone, a program to support immigrant students at Arizona State University. This led to using experimental design to test the effectiveness of the DREAMzone ally development program in contrast to a documentary and to a control group (Cadenas, Cisneros, et al., 2018). Analyses revealed that both interventions (i.e., program and documentary) centering lived experiences and trustworthy facts were effective in promoting empathy toward immigrants, boosting competence to support them, and decreasing anxiety about immigration. Both studies have led to advances in basic science and intervention research.

True to my admiration for free speech, I was thrilled to match for a doctoral internship in health service psychology at the University of California Berkeley, where I stayed a second year as a postdoctoral fellow. During my time there, I was largely dedicated to working with first-generation, immigrant, international, and minoritized students. I was also embedded within the Undocumented Student Program, where we codeveloped innovative individual and systemic approaches to delivering mental health services in a national climate that was growingly perilous. Insights from my time at Berkeley informed future studies, such as one drawing from a national sample of university students that showed how lacking permanently protected legal statuses was associated with greater mental health distress and discrimination (Cadenas & Nienhusser, 2021).

Since 2018, I have been in the faculty at research-intensive institutions. I started as an assistant professor at Lehigh University in the counseling psychology PhD program, and I am now an associate professor in the clinical psychology PsyD program at Rutgers. Here, I am also associate director of the Center for Youth Social Emotional Wellness, and I

direct the Lab for Immigrant Rights and Mental Health. My academic career has been an excellent platform to expand collaborations with local and national immigrant rights advocacy organizations and activists. I have developed an approach to community-based research sustained alongside wonderful university students, wise community leaders, and supportive peers and mentors. These alliances have led to developing models for immigration advocacy to prevent policy-based harm and trauma (Cadenas et al., 2024), as well as empirically supported models for antiracist immigration activism that is linked to healthy coping (Cadenas, Domenech Rodríguez, et al., 2025). Most recently, I partnered with the nonprofit Immschools to pilot promising school-based prevention programs for immigrant youth and families.

Latinx and immigrants are integral to the workforce, which is why some of my scholarship is pillared in vocational psychology. I have developed effective culturally responsive career interventions for groups facing precarity to develop social entrepreneurship and technology skills (Cadenas et al., 2020). Relatedly, a theoretical piece written with a dear, leading scholar provided a vision for vocational research and career intervention that integrates critical consciousness to become of greater relevance to a diverse global workforce (Cadenas & McWhirter, 2022). This summer, I was delighted to be a closing plenary speaker at the Society of Vocational Psychology Conference in Switzerland.

As an early career professional, I endeavor to inform the training of providers in response to shifting global dynamics. Collaborating with other formerly undocumented mental health professionals and the Informed Immigrant hub, I developed a guide for providing mental health services in the context of the Supreme Court case on Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals. That guide has been downloaded more than 14,000 times and led to developing, alongside APA and the National Latinx Psychological Association, the first evidence-based training model for enhancing immigrant mental health competencies (Cadenas et al., 2022). Furthermore, leaning into liberation psychology and *testimonios*, a group of students and faculty collaborators developed the alive co mentoring model to support people of the global majority to succeed in psychology and allied health training programs (Cadenas, Sosa, et al., 2025). I have also served the profession in the APA Presidential Task Force on Immigration and Health and as associate editor of the *Journal of Counseling Psychology* and leadership roles in the Society of Counseling Psychology and the APA Advocacy Coordinating Committee.

Advancing the science and theory on immigrant mental health has been meaningful, yet the biggest impact of my work can be seen in the public sphere. I am especially proud of a project with the National Latinx Psychological Association and the Alliance of Ethnic Psychological Associations to brief congressional leaders on the disproportional impact of the

pandemic on communities of color. The resultant was an empirically supported framework showing how greater legal protections (e.g., citizenship) can shield immigrants from negative health impacts (Cadenas et al., 2023). In 2023, I joined a coalition of legal organizations (i.e., Justice Action Center, Raices, University of California, Los Angeles Center for Immigration Law and Policy) as an intervenor in a federal case (Texas vs. Department of Homeland Security) to protect the Biden administration's humanitarian parole program for Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans, and Venezuelans. Our win in the courts, although short lived, provided refuge and safety for hundreds of thousands of immigrants from these crisis-afflicted countries. That same year, I was pleased to be among a group of Venezuelan Americans invited to the White House to celebrate the contributions of our diaspora in the United States. Bringing my perspective to a global audience of policymakers, I was honored to be a speaker at the 2024 Psychology Day at the United Nations.

I am proud to be a public scholar and Latin American. I cherish the civil and human rights that I now get to enjoy and that have been built upon the struggle for freedom by so many who came before me. The humility of knowing my place in this collective story motivates me to continue working for social justice.

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