



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

WILEY

# Immigrants and legal status: Do personal contacts matter?

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## Abstract

Using unique Italian survey data on both documented and undocumented immigrants, we empirically quantify the correlation between different types of personal contacts and immigrants' documentation probability, while also uncovering the contacts' indirect associations via immigrant labour market outcomes (employment status and job characteristics). Our results indicate that contacts with both natives and family members have a positive and quantitatively large effect on immigrant documentation probability, conditional on a large set of covariates. Contacts with members of the same ethnic group, by contrast, increase documentation probability only moderately, an effect explainable by these co-ethnics' association with employment probability. Moreover, our findings support the hypothesis that native contacts can connect immigrants with jobs that favour documentation.

## KEYWORDS

immigrant integration, labour market outcomes, legal status, networks, personal contacts

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Undocumented immigration is at the core of the policy debate in most destination countries, with U.S. estimates being around 11.5 million (Hoefer, Rytina, & Baker, 2011) and European (EU-27) figures ranging between 1.9 and 3.8 million (Vogel, Kovacheva, & Prescott, 2011). Legal status not only shapes immigrants' integration outcomes—including employment and wages (Borjas & Tienda, 1993), remittances (Amuedo-Dorantes & Mazzolari, 2010), and consumption behaviours (Dustmann, Fasani, & Speciale, 2017)—but is a key factor of stratification within immigrant groups (Jasso, 2011; Menjivar, 2006). Yet, despite the great concern over and the pervasive effects of immigrant legal status, undocumented immigration remains an underexplored field, and knowledge about the process of accessing and retaining legal status is limited (Cvajner & Sciortino, 2010).

This paper contributes to the literature by empirically assessing the association between the personal contacts of immigrants and immigrants' probability of having legal status. Whereas previous studies highlight the relevance of the personal contact–legal status relation by focusing on specific pathways like no-visa entry (Liu, 2015; Massey, Durand, & Pren, 2014; Singer & Massey, 1998; Vickstrom, 2014), overstaying and falling into irregularity (Vickstrom, 2014), and access to legalisation programmes

(Hagan, 1998), we address the overall effect of personal contacts on documentation probability while also uncovering their indirect effect via their influence on the labour market (Calvo-Armengol & Jackson, 2004; Granovetter, 1973; Montgomery, 1994). Although largely overlooked in the research to date, immigrants' labour market outcomes—in terms of both employment status and job characteristics—are key not only in work-related entry and legalisation schemes (Chauvin, Garcés-Masareñas, & Kraler, 2013) but also in those that condition eligibility on different requirements, such as residence conditions (Hagan, 1994, 1998).

Based on our literature review, we conclude that personal contacts may have contrasting effects on legal status and that this effect is likely to vary across different contact types. We also conclude that personal contacts increase the probability of having legal status if they positively associate with the probability of being employed and with job characteristics that can favour documentation, such as more stable employment relationships. Therefore, although we remain agnostic on the association between personal contacts and legal status, we make two key testable predictions about the role of labour market outcomes in shaping the link between different contact types and documentation probability.

To test these predictions, we use a unique survey dataset collected in the southern Italian region of Calabria during the period

2007–2008. In addition to covering both documented and undocumented immigrants, these data include a proxy for personal contacts. Although irregularity is admittedly a multifaceted phenomenon that encompasses complex definitional issues (Jandl, 2004; Kraler, 2009), in our empirical investigation, documented immigrants are identified as those who hold a residence permit that also allows them to work. Personal contacts are measured with a question asking about familial (family members), ethnic (same ethnic group), and native contacts available in Italy before arrival. Although this proxy imperfectly captures contacts availability after arrival, it solves any issues of reverse causality, a common concern in this research field. We are thus able to identify how personal contacts correlate with legal status and assess their indirect effects via the labour market. In doing so, we also provide new quantitative evidence on how the personal contacts of immigrants influence their employment probability and specific job characteristics. To the best of our knowledge, this study not only is one of the very few to employ a sample that includes undocumented immigrants but is also the first to address this issue using Italian data. The latter is important because although research documents immigrants' heavy reliance on personal contacts to navigate a complex bureaucratic system, cope with limited channels of legalisation, and circumvent barriers on the official labour market (Ambrosini, 2012; Riccio, 2001), a systematic study of the role of immigrants' contacts in the Italian context remains lacking.

The regions on Europe's southern border, such as Calabria, although characterised by poor economic conditions (Eurostat, 2016), have all experienced a dramatic increase in immigrant inflows in recent years (UNDESA, 2016) and have similar models of immigration (King, 2000). However, although scholars have noted that support via migrant networks is subject to severe constraints in such poor contexts (Cranford, 2005; Mahler, 1995; Menjívar, 2000; Rosales, 2014), a serious absence of microdata hampers our knowledge of immigrants' integration in the area, including labour market and legal status outcomes and the effect of personal contacts. Our study thus aims to begin filling this void.

Our estimates do provide evidence that having a personal contact increases documentation probability, but they reveal sharp differences across contact types. In particular, whereas the marginal effect of native contacts on legal status is about 20 percentage points independent of the controls included in the regression model, the effect of ethnic contacts is less than 10 percentage points and drops to zero once we control for employment status. This result suggests that co-ethnics help immigrants gain legal status mainly because they increase employment probability. This intuition is supported by our explicit examination of indirect labour market effects, which identifies a large positive impact of ethnic contacts on immigrant employment that is not evident for familial and native contacts. Our results also indicate that ethnic contacts are associated with occupations that are less likely to provide access to regularisation programmes, whereas the opposite seems to hold for native contacts. Taken together, these findings point to a complex interrelation between the personal contacts of individual immigrants and their legal and labour outcomes.

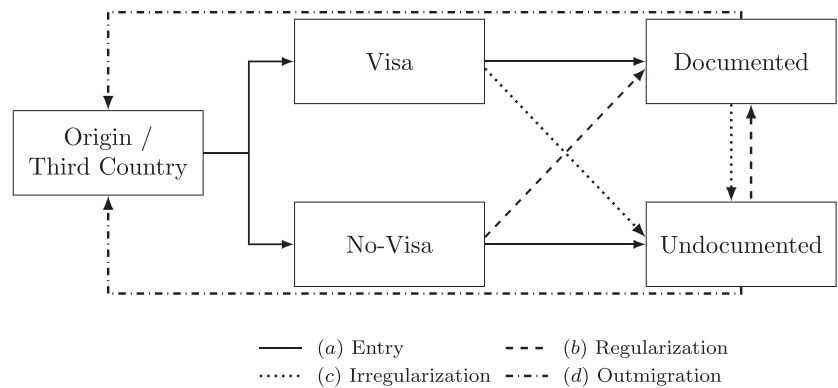
## 2 | PERSONAL CONTACTS AND LEGAL STATUS

### 2.1 | Documentation

In our study, we are interested in how personal contacts affect immigrants' legal status in the destination country, represented by “documented” and “undocumented” on the right side of Figure 1. Although the political discourse on irregular migration tends to stress illegal entry (Vollmer, 2011), represented by the “no-visa” entry option in the figure, the latter accounts for a relatively small fraction of the undocumented population (Triandafyllidou, 2010). Rather, there is substantial mobility across legal statuses (Cvajner & Sciortino, 2010; Vickstrom, 2014), as illustrated by the eventual granting of humanitarian protection-based residence permits to many of the visa-less forced immigrants landing on Mediterranean coasts. Moreover, once arrived, undocumented immigrants who meet specific eligibility criteria can access the regularisation initiatives that are common in major immigration countries (Casarico, Facchini, & Frattini, 2015; Kraler, 2009).<sup>1</sup> In many nations, however, the vast majority of undocumented immigrants are those who have remained in the host country after the expiration of a visa or temporary residence permit.<sup>2</sup> Such undocumented presences are influenced by immigrant decisions to stay or to move back to their homeland or to a new destination. The three possibilities available to immigrants—regularisation, irregularity, and outmigration—are graphed in Figure 1 as options (b), (c), and (d), respectively. All such transitions across legal statuses—and ultimately, the probability of immigrants holding a residence permit at a given time—depend not only on the institutional and legal context (De Genova, 2004, 2013) but also on push and pull migration factors and the economic and social resources accessible to immigrants (Massey et al., 2014). Our analysis focuses on the role of personal contacts.

### 2.2 | The role of personal contacts

Scholars have long noted how social interaction shapes many realms of the migration and adaptation process (Boyd, 1989; Massey, Rafael, Jorge, & Gonzalez, 1987), including the migration decision (Massey & Espinosa, 1997), assimilation in terms of labour market outcomes (Munshi, 2003), linguistic skills (Chiswick & Miller, 2005), welfare use (Bertrand, Luttmer, & Mullainathan, 2000), political participation (Hritzuk & Park, 2000), and naturalisation (Abascal, 2017).<sup>3</sup> Also emphasised has been the role of personal contacts in immigrant documentation, first articulated by Hagan (1994) in her analysis of regularisation among undocumented Maya immigrants in Houston. Subsequent research has pointed to the relevance of personal contacts in determining specific legal status transitions (as depicted in Figure 1) by focusing on the migration streams between Mexico and the United States (Massey et al., 2014; Singer & Massey, 1998) and between sub-Saharan Africa and Europe (Liu, 2015; Poeze, 2010; Vickstrom, 2014). Personal contacts substantially alter immigrants'

**FIGURE 1** Immigrant transitions across legal statuses

perception of the costs associated with illegality, such as missed access to welfare programmes and civil rights, and the chances of accessing and maintaining legal status. Research also highlights the role of contacts in conveying information, providing material assistance and emotional and cultural support, and exerting normative pressure.<sup>4</sup>

### 2.2.1 | No-visa entry

The contrasting effects of personal contacts on visa entry (Liu, 2015) may range from the facilitation of illegal entry through prearrival border-crossing information and postarrival material assistance to the encouragement and support of legal entry (Poeze, 2010) through dissemination of information on and assistance with visa application procedures and visa-related programmes (e.g., family-reunification or sponsor-based schemes). Contacts may also express disapproval of illegal border-crossing attempts. Nevertheless, research identifies no clear effect of personal contacts on no-visa entry (Liu, 2015; Vickstrom, 2014)—although contacts with migration experience strongly predict undocumented trips (Massey et al., 2014)—and large heterogeneity across measures of social capital and areas of origin (Liu, 2015; Massey et al., 2014).

### 2.2.2 | Overstay and irregular stay

Research suggests that personal contacts increase immigrants' chances of survival in irregularity by offering such material resources as housing and/or financial and logistic support and by compensating for immigrants' limited access to formal services (Cvajner & Sciortino, 2010; Rosales, 2013). Personal contacts can also transmit information on how to circumvent institutional constraints and to access alternative welfare services like health care (Devillanova, 2008; Huschke, 2014; Menjivar, 2002). We find no explicit conceptualization of the link between personal contacts and overstaying in the literature. Nevertheless, Vickstrom (2014) documented a negative impact of having children or a spouse in the destination region on the probability of overstaying as well as no significant effect for the number of other personal contacts.

### 2.2.3 | Regularisation

Personal contacts may affect the individual probability of gaining legal status after arrival, not only by helping undocumented immigrants meet eligibility requirements but also by influencing individual desire to apply for legalisation. Examples of the former channel include providing the stable accommodation needed for application, financial aid, information on the technical workings of the application, and, as in the context of the 1986 U.S. IRCA, affidavits to support it (Hagan, 1994, 1998). As for the latter channel, personal contacts can shape individuals' beliefs about the expected benefit of applying for amnesty. For example, in the case of IRCA, after a few months, formal eligibility was no longer a significant consideration for migrants applying for legalisation, which depended more strongly on information on stories of successful legalisation within the community (Hagan, 1998, p. 63). Hagan (1998) also documented how the labour market consequences of different types of personal contacts played a key role in explaining programme take-up rates: for example, how the segregation of women in live-in domestic jobs found through co-ethnic referral prevented access to legalisation.

### 2.2.4 | Employment

In general, personal contacts increase immigrant documentation probability if they correlate positively with the *probability of being employed* and, conditional on employment, with *job characteristics* that are relevant for accessing and maintaining legal status. This link, although documented for the U.S. IRCA, is likely to be even stronger for the work-related entry schemes and legalisation initiatives common across the globe.<sup>5</sup> For example, not only does having a stable occupation make it easier to prove past residence and employment experience, but job stability reduces the probability of falling into irregularity if renewal is conditional on being employed. In employment-based regularisation initiatives whose application procedures require employer involvement (Chauvin et al., 2013), personal contacts can better connect job seekers with employers willing to participate in the process. Hence, although the vast literature on the labour market effects of personal contacts is heterogeneous in terms of adopted measures and analytic methodologies, it generally agrees

that the effects—on either employment probabilities, wages, or other job characteristics—can vary greatly with contact type (Burt, 2001; Granovetter, 1973; Lin, 1999; Portes, 1998). Indeed, the quantitative evidence on immigrants' personal contacts indicates broad effect heterogeneity across contact types.<sup>6</sup> For instance, although contacts with natives do appear to raise employment probability (Kanas, van Tubergen, & van der Lippe, 2011; Lancee, 2010), the effect on income and upward mobility remains unclear (Kanas, Chiswick, van der Lippe, & van Tubergen, 2012; Lancee, 2010; Moroşanu, 2016). Conversely, personal contacts did appear to enhance the employment outcomes of Mexican immigrants in the United States (Munshi, 2003), although their effectiveness varied by both contact type (friendship vs. familial ties) and legal status (Aguilera & Massey, 2003; Amuedo-Dorantes & Mundra, 2007). Research has also shown that contacts are helpful in finding employment only in comparably low positions in the labour market (Kalter & Kogan, 2014), producing detrimental effects in segmented labour markets by lowering wages and employment probabilities (Enchautegui, 2002; Green, Tigges, & Diaz, 1999) and/or leading to ethnically concentrated jobs (Elliott, 2001).

### 2.2.5 | Heterogeneous effects

Outside the labour market arena too, access to personal contacts does not necessarily imply a positive effect on integration outcomes. For example, the negative impacts of immigrant networks may include the damaging effects of levelling and in-group norms on individual economic advancement and integration (Portes & Sensenbrenner, 1993). In particular, studies point to the limited functioning of social support networks among immigrants in poor contexts. Indeed, access to personal contacts does not necessarily imply their activation: This latter depends much on the resources and the normative judgement of the potential helpers, and different contacts tend to provide specific forms of assistance depending on the intimacy and trust shared with the person in need (Menjívar, 2002). Evidence from poor immigration contexts thus tends to highlight the negative effects of immigrant contacts as possible conduits of misinformation (Menjívar, 2002; Rosales, 2014), channels of exploitation (Cranford, 2005; Mahler, 1995; Rosales, 2014) and occupational segregation (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001; Ramirez & Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2009), and sources of damaging envy and competition (Mahler, 1995; Menjívar, 2002).

## 3 | HYPOTHESES

To empirically address the association between immigrants' personal contacts and documentation probability, which, the above research suggests, is theoretically ambiguous, we put forward the following mutually exclusive hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 1a.** Personal contacts will be associated with a higher probability of being documented.

**Hypothesis 1b.** Personal contacts will be associated with a lower probability of being documented.

Personal contacts are expected to increase documentation probability if immigrants improve their employment outcomes in terms of both employment probability and job characteristics. This link, however, is likely to vary based on the type of personal contact. We summarise these observations in the form of two testable predictions:

**Hypothesis 2.** Under H1a (H1b), the association between personal contacts and legal status will decline (increase) in absolute value when the employment status is included in a model predicting documentation probability for those contacts associated with a higher employment probability.

Considering first the case of a positive association between contact type and legal status (H1a), we hypothesize that it will be partially driven by the employment effect of the contact, if any. If so, when we control for individual employment status, the personal contact–legal status correlation will decline relatively more for contacts having a larger positive employment effect. In the case of H1b, however, controlling for employment will exacerbate the negative correlation for contacts having a higher probability of being employed.

**Hypothesis 3.** Under H1a (H1b), once we control for employment, contacts that maintain a higher (lower) correlation in absolute value with documentation probability will be associated with employment characteristics that favour documentation.

According to this hypothesis, given a positive correlation between personal contacts and immigrant documentation probability, once employment status is controlled for, we expect contacts showing higher correlations to have job characteristics that are more useful for accessing regularisation programmes. The reasoning is analogous to the case of H1b: better job characteristics are associated with less negative correlation between contacts and legal status.

## 4 | CONTEXT AND DATA

This analysis uses a unique 2007–2008 dataset of both documented and undocumented immigrants living in the southern Italian region of Calabria.

### 4.1 | Context

European countries are characterised by striking internal disparities, with regions whose GDP per capita (NUTS 2, PPPs) is less than 75% of the EU-28 average disproportionately concentrated along the southern and eastern borders (Eurostat, 2016). During the last few years, these regions have experienced a dramatic increase in their foreign populations: in particular, peak migration pressure stemming from the

Middle East crisis (UNDESA, 2016). Most of these regions also belong to a group of countries—Greece, Italy, Portugal, and Spain—that scholars associate with a common Mediterranean immigration model (King, 2000) in which foreign workers have high employment rates but are concentrated in lower status occupations and in the informal sector (Ballarino & Panichella, 2015; Reyneri, 2001; Reyneri & Fullin, 2011). This incorporation model characterises Italy in general (Fullin & Reyneri, 2011; Pugliese, 2002) but southern Italian regions in particular (Avola, 2015).

In this respect, Calabria, which encompasses five provinces and 409 municipalities, offers a compelling case. This region, whose per-capita GDP is about two-thirds of the Italian average, has a 26.9% poverty rate that is over five times that of the national rate of 4.9% (Istat, 2015). Likewise, its employment rate is only around 33.6%, 10 percentage points less than the national rate, with a remarkably high incidence of irregular work, about 29% in 2009, whereas the national average is 12%.<sup>7</sup> At the beginning of 2007, Calabria had approximately 2 million residents (3.4% of the Italian population), including 50,871 officially resident foreigners representing 2.5% of the total population, much lower than the 9% in the more dynamic northern and central regions. In recent years, however, the area is experiencing a spectacular increase in migration inflows—including a particularly high 44.5% between 2007 and 2008 (Istat, 2016). Calabria is also characterised by a high undocumented presence that in 2008 represented over 30% of the total immigrants in southern Italy (vs. 15% nationally, which fell to 6% in 2013; ISMU, 2013). This share reached its maximum of 38.9% in the Calabrian province of Crotona (ISMU, 2008).

Because the Italian regulatory framework does not allow legal entrance for reasons of job search,<sup>8</sup> since 1998, the main legal channel for entrance for work reasons has been the quota agreements, which accounted for 150,000 entries in 2008. These agreements, although *de jure* targeted at prospective immigrants with an employer willing to hire them, *de facto* operate as a “mini-regularization program of (employed) people already in the country” (Ambrosini & Triandafyllidou, 2011, p. 253). At the same time, access to family-reunification visa schemes is far from automatic: Italy imposes relatively restrictive income, housing, and legal status conditions on primary migrants before they can bring in their family members. These factors help explain the frequent operation of irregular reunification pathways in the Italian context (Vickstrom & González-Ferrer, 2016).

Italy has run numerous amnesty programmes, which account for the country's large share of documented foreigners.<sup>9</sup> The largest legalisation programme, implemented in 2002 with over 700,000 applications, granted legal status to as many undocumented immigrants as the 91.3% of regular presences in 2003 in southern Italy (compared with 47.9% nationally; Istat, 2005). Since 2002, amnesty programmes have conditioned eligibility on being employed at the time of application, which is a common requirement of regularisation programmes in southern European countries (Kraler, 2009). It is worth emphasising that the institutional design of both legalisation schemes in Italy—quota agreements and amnesty programmes—implies that undocumented immigrants must

be employed in order to access legal status. At the same time, the available evidence does not identify any clear effect of gaining legal status on immigrants' probability of being employed, with studies documenting positive (Pan, 2012), null (Kaushal, 2006), or even negative (Amuedo-Dorantes & Bansak, 2011) effects.

A further distinguishing feature of the Italian immigration framework is that most residence permit categories allow immigrants to work. For instance, as of the beginning of 2008 (Istat, 2016), 91.42% of the non-EU foreign citizens lawfully residing in Calabria for work (45.36%), family (41.40%), study (1.72%), or asylum (2.94%) could accept employment, although all students were subject to an hourly limit. Other exceptions included asylum seekers and those under humanitarian protection (0.6%), who were not allowed to work during the first 2 months (6 months in 2007) following arrival. Hence, only about 2.5% of the documented presence in Calabria at that time (which resembled the presence nationally) was likely to be ineligible for a work permit.

## 4.2 | Data

The survey data were collected as part of the European EQUAL project (Comito, Critelli, Cuomo, D'Angelillo, & Musolino, 2008) designed to monitor the migrant integration process in the regional labour market. Data collection was conducted by eight partners, comprising a consortium of three universities (Mediterranean University of Reggio Calabria, University of Messina, and University of Calabria), professional training institutions, and Catholic and lay nonprofit associations, chosen from among organisations actively operating with immigrants and most rooted in the area. This multiplicity of associations was intended to reduce possible bias in the sample selection process.

Sampling was based on an intercept point survey method suitable for reaching individuals not accounted for in official statistics, such as recently arrived and irregular immigrants (McKenzie & Mistiaen, 2009). During the 6 months of fieldwork (October 2007–April 2008), each partner institution collected questionnaires at intercept points scattered throughout the region for 1 month chosen at random. Enumerators were instructed to randomly approach subjects from among all the immigrants over 18 years of age who showed up at that location. The basic characteristics of the sample were cross-checked with those available on the documented population at the end of fieldwork.<sup>10</sup> Although the representativeness of a sample whose underlying population includes undocumented immigrants is difficult to assess, later cross-checks indicate that the survey data are a rather good match with the little available information on immigrants in Calabria.

The initial sample consists of 911 individuals representing 51 different countries, although 66% hail from five nations: Morocco, Romania, Ukraine, Albania, and Poland.<sup>11</sup> We drop individuals from the EU and Schengen Area countries, since they are visa-exempt and legally entitled to enter and reside in Italy, as well as those individuals for whom information on legal status is missing. The final sample includes 632 respondents. An individual's legal status is denoted by

the variable *Documented<sub>i</sub>*, an indicator equal to 1 if immigrant *i* has a residence permit for work at the time of interview and 0 otherwise. Note, however, that although the survey question “Do you hold a residence permit for work?” captures permits that allow employment, it does not identify mixed legal status. Nevertheless, in the Italian legal context, there is a major overlap between residence and work permits because most permit types allow employment, and all work permits are conditional on legal stay (Vickstrom & González-Ferrer, 2016).

Whereas immigrant employment status is self-declared and includes seasonal and irregular jobs, job characteristics are derived from two survey questions asked only to the 367 employed individuals. The first, “Could you indicate your actual working conditions?,” has five possible responses—“open-ended,” “fixed-term,” “part-time,” “seasonal,” and “irregular”—based on which we construct a *Regular Job* indicator equal to 0 for the irregular option and 1 otherwise. The second question, “Do you have a job contract?,” for which 12% of the employed are missing data, is the basis for an indicator equal to 1 if the worker has an employment contract and 0 otherwise. Although the item phrasing for these two indicators is admittedly imprecise, both variables meet our key criterion: They capture the more stable occupations that are likely to facilitate access to legalisation programmes.

We report summary statistics for the regression sample in Table 1: first for the full sample and then for two subsamples split by legal status. As the table shows, the average age is 35 years, gender composition is roughly balanced, about half the sample are married, and 59% reported having a child at the time of interview. Forty-one percent of the sample have an upper secondary education or above. The primary motivation for migrating is economic (vs. political, religious, study, family, or other). More than half the sample had been in Italy for at least 3 years at time of interview (as measured by a *Years Since Migration* indicator of less than 1 year, between 1 and 3 years, or more than 3 years). As for irregularity, 38% of respondents are undocumented, a figure reassuringly close to the 38.9% share estimated by ISMU (2008) for the Calabrian province of Crotone. Seventy-three percent of the sample are employed, but, as expected, the employment probability is lower for undocumented immigrants. The table also reveals that job characteristics differ greatly between documented and undocumented immigrants.

Our measure of personal contacts is obtained from the question “Did you know whom you could call on before leaving?” The possible, and mutually exclusive, answers—contacts with Italians, family members, or those in the same ethnic community—allow us to address two priorities in this research field: namely, empirically assessing network effects using data on *actual* (vs. impersonal) *contacts* and differentiating between *relationship types* (DiMaggio & Garip, 2012). Because this question leaves the definition of co-ethnic to respondents and we have no information on the strength of personal contacts, responses could include members of the ancestry group or people born in the origin country. Moreover, contacts may include friends or acquaintances made in the country of origin or in Italy during previous migration experiences. They might even include people to whom direct contacts have referred the immigrant for help. Admittedly, because

**TABLE 1** Descriptive statistics

	Total	Documented	Undocumented	
Variables	M [SD]	M [SD]	M [SD]	Δ
Legal status				
Documented	0.62			
Labour market condition				
Employed	0.73	0.88	0.48	<sup>a</sup>
Regular job (if employee)	0.72	0.93	0.23	<sup>a</sup>
Contract (if employee)	0.71	0.88	0.20	<sup>a</sup>
Personal contacts				
Native	0.09	0.11	0.06	
Familial	0.33	0.33	0.32	
Ethnic	0.35	0.35	0.33	
Individual characteristics				
Age	35 [9.84]	38 [9.39]	30 [8.54]	<sup>a</sup>
Female	0.45	0.43	0.49	
Married	0.50	0.58	0.38	<sup>a</sup>
Child	0.59	0.68	0.44	<sup>a</sup>
High education	0.41	0.44	0.37	
Economic motivation	0.66	0.75	0.51	<sup>a</sup>
Years since migration				
Ysm < 1	0.12	0.03	0.26	<sup>a</sup>
1 < Ysm < 3	0.24	0.12	0.43	<sup>a</sup>
Ysm > 3	0.64	0.85	0.31	<sup>a</sup>
Areas of origin				
Southern America	0.03	0.02	0.04	
Africa	0.42	0.42	0.42	
Eastern Europe	0.40	0.40	0.40	
Asia	0.15	0.16	0.14	
N	632	390	242	
Employees	367	257	110	
Regular job, if employee	367	257	110	
Contract, if employee	324	243	81	

<sup>a</sup>Denotes a difference between documented and undocumented immigrants that is significant at least at 5%.

the survey provides no information on personal contacts at destination, we are forced to proxy for actual contacts using information on those already known pre migration. This proxy, however (in the spirit of Amuedo-Dorantes & Mundra, 2007; Goel & Lang, 2010; and Kalter & Kogan, 2014), has the major advantage of addressing any issues of reverse causality that could affect actual contacts at



destination. The one possible shortcoming is that if pre-existing personal contacts imperfectly capture their availability after arrival,<sup>12</sup> our measure could induce an attenuation bias, which would make a finding of no association between personal contact and study outcome more likely. As reported in Table 1, roughly 77% reported having either a familial (33%) or an ethnic (35%) contact, with only a few (9%) stipulating a native contact. Although documented immigrants are more likely to have a native contact than undocumented immigrants (11% vs. 6% in Table 1), the difference is not statistically significant at a standard level. All other differences between covariates in the two samples go in the expected direction.

## 5 | EMPIRICAL FRAMEWORK

We estimate variants of the following linear probability model:

$$Y_{i,j,p} = \alpha + \beta \text{Contact}_i + \gamma X_i + \mu K_i + \delta Z_p + \theta J_i + \varepsilon_{i,j,p}, \quad (1)$$

where we account for the heteroskedasticity that this choice implies by using robust standard errors.<sup>13</sup>  $Y_{i,j,p}$  is the generic binary outcome of interest of immigrant  $i$ , from area of origin  $j$ , residing in province  $p$ .  $\text{Contact}_i$  is the indicator for the presence of personal contacts, as captured by pre-existing personal contacts, and  $\beta$  is the main parameter of interest.  $J_i$  is a set of origin-area fixed effects, and  $X_i$  is a vector of predetermined individual characteristics: basic demographics (gender, age, age squared, marital status, and having children), individual human capital (highest educational level),<sup>14</sup> and an indicator for economic migration, designed to control for different motivations to migrate that are potentially correlated with the outcomes variables.  $K_i$  then includes two possibly endogenous individual characteristics: employment status (in the documentation probability model) and time since migration.  $Z_p$  denotes two provincial controls: The first is a measure of the spatial concentration of migrants from each origin country given by the (log)total number of immigrants in province  $p$  from origin country  $j$  of individual  $i$  over the total number of immigrants in the province. The second is the provincial unemployment rate, included to control for labour market conditions in the reference province.<sup>15</sup>

Two typical concerns with this type of regression analysis are *reverse causality* and *non-random selection into contacts*. The former may occur, for example, when being documented provides individuals greater exposure to personal contacts, thereby increasing their probability of establishing personal relationships. Such interaction with new people can expose undocumented immigrants to a higher risk of detention and induce them to consistently restrict and select their personal contacts (Huschke, 2014; Völker & Flap, 2001). Similar considerations apply for employment probability and job characteristics. At the same time, individuals self-select into contacts by choosing whether and with whom to interact (Feld, 1981; Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1954; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001), which becomes problematic when those with different personal contacts differ on some unobservable characteristic that correlates with the outcome of interest. Even selection into the survey is possible if the

personal contacts variable correlates with sampling probability and the outcomes of interest—for example, if having a familial contact of no use in getting legal status increases the probability of moving to another country. In our framework, reverse causality is not an issue because contact information refers to premigration knowledge (Amuedo-Dorantes & Mundra, 2007; Goel & Lang, 2010; Kalter & Kogan, 2014). Nonetheless, we acknowledge possible biases induced by self-selection.

## 6 | RESULTS

Table 2 reports the results for documentation probability. The regressors in column 1 are personal contacts (with “no contact” as the excluded category) and origin-area fixed effect. Columns 2 and 3, respectively, add in predetermined individual characteristics and employment status. Column 2 shows a clear association between having a personal contact at the destination and higher documentation probability, which supports H1a. For native and familial contacts, respectively, point estimates imply 24.5 and 18.6 percentage point increases in documentation probability, an increase that reduces only moderately in column 3 when we control for employment status. Although ethnic contacts also appear to be associated with a higher probability of legal status, the effect is smaller (8.2) and drops dramatically in column 3, after which the estimated coefficient becomes statistically no different from zero at the standard level of significance. As also expected, higher documentation probability is always significantly associated with being employed. These findings speak to H2 and H3 by suggesting that the indirect labour market effect of social contacts may play a different role across contact types.

As previously discussed, even though our personal contact measure allows us to overcome the usual reverse-causality issues, our estimates could still be biased if immigrants with and without a personal contact differ systematically in a way that correlates with their regularisation probability. Note that point estimates for native and familial contacts are reasonably stable across specifications, even when we control for the possibly endogenous variables years since migration and provincial characteristics (columns 4 and 5, respectively). Following Bertrand et al.'s (2000) argument, treating observable characteristics as unobservables should strongly impact effect estimates when at least some are correlated with individual unobservable characteristics, implying that selection on unobservables is unlikely to be driving our results.

As for the other controls, provincial variables are both statistically significant and signed as expected. Being documented is strongly associated with having migrated for economic reasons, a finding that, in conjunction with those for employment status and provincial-level unemployment rates, is easily explainable by the predominance in Italy of work-related schemes to access legal status. The estimated coefficient for age is also positive, whereas those for all other individual covariates are not statistically different from zero. As expected, the probability of being undocumented decreases with permanence in Italy, possibly because the Italian legal framework offers no specific

**TABLE 2** Documentation probability

Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Personal contacts (Ref: no contact)					
Native	0.204*** [0.072]	0.245*** [0.068]	0.232*** [0.063]	0.227*** [0.057]	0.208*** [0.058]
Familial	0.088* [0.053]	0.186*** [0.046]	0.163*** [0.043]	0.116*** [0.038]	0.096** [0.038]
Ethnic	0.095* [0.053]	0.082* [0.047]	0.025 [0.045]	−0.005 [0.040]	−0.027 [0.039]
Female		−0.083** [0.040]	−0.046 [0.037]	−0.049 [0.035]	−0.042 [0.035]
Age		0.061*** [0.011]	0.040*** [0.011]	0.026** [0.010]	0.023** [0.010]
Age <sup>2</sup>		−0.001*** [0.000]	−0.000*** [0.000]	−0.000* [0.000]	−0.000 [0.000]
High education		0.084** [0.038]	0.051 [0.035]	0.011 [0.032]	0.012 [0.032]
Married		0.014 [0.048]	0.010 [0.044]	−0.024 [0.039]	−0.030 [0.039]
Child		−0.003 [0.053]	0.007 [0.050]	−0.040 [0.045]	−0.040 [0.044]
Economic motivation		0.176*** [0.042]	0.138*** [0.039]	0.130*** [0.035]	0.130*** [0.035]
Employment			0.353*** [0.044]	0.266*** [0.044]	0.243*** [0.045]
Years since migration (Ref: Ysm > 3)					
Ysm < 1				−0.466*** [0.054]	−0.440*** [0.055]
1 < Ysm < 3				−0.395*** [0.046]	−0.387*** [0.046]
Impersonal contacts					0.057** [0.023]
Unemployment rate					−0.289* [0.153]
Area dummies	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
R <sup>2</sup>	0.013	0.234	0.322	0.450	0.458
N	632	632	632	632	632

Notes: Robust standard errors are in parentheses.

\*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

\*\* $p < 0.05$ .

\* $p < 0.1$ .

mechanism by which undocumented immigrants can acquire legal status. They are thus forced to wait (often a substantial time) for erratic regularisation programmes through which to exit their unauthorised condition. Nonetheless, we cannot rule out the possibility that the observed correlation is shaped by the outmigration of individuals who, having failed to regularise their presence, decide to return home or move to a new destination, thereby exiting the sample.

Table 3 reports the results for employment probability, which are again derived from progressively saturated models.<sup>16</sup> All controls have the expected sign: Economically motivated migration is strongly associated with employment outcome, education correlates positively with employment probability, the spatial concentration of same-origin-country immigrants has a positive and highly statistically significant coefficient, and female immigrants experience lower employment probability than males. Remarkably, however, whereas the estimated coefficients for ethnic contacts are positive and significant at the 1% level in all specifications, those for familial and native contacts are statistically no different from zero. Moreover, this effect of ethnic contacts is quantitatively large: Having such a contact in Italy increases the employment probability by approximately 11.4 percentage points, although with minor differences across specifications. Taken together, the results in Table 2 (columns 3–5) and Table 3 are consistent with H2.

To test H3, we cautiously examine *Regular Job* and *Contract*, two variables designed to capture more stable employment relationships.

Table 4 thus reports the estimated coefficients for the probability of having a regular job (odd columns) or employment contract (even columns). The structure of the table mirrors that of the previous ones, with the last two columns including the full set of available controls.<sup>17</sup> These Table 4 results show that ethnic contacts are more likely to be associated with employment in less stable occupations than having no contacts. Point estimates for natives and relatives are closer to zero and significant at the 10% threshold in two specifications only. However, they suggest that native contacts are positively associated with the probability of working in occupations favouring regularisation and that the opposite is true for familial ones.<sup>18</sup> One possible explanation is that familial contacts positively correlate with documentation probability mainly through other channels, such as family-reunification schemes or other forms of material assistance not analysable using our data set.

We check the robustness of our results by playing with immigrant permanence in Italy, testing particularly for any survivorship bias induced when personal contacts correlate with outmigration, in which case the bias would vary with time spent in Italy. A similar concern is any possible correlation between the variables of interest (documented status, labour market outcomes, and personal contacts) and the probability of accessing the intercept points at which data were collected, because the latter may in turn correlate with observed permanence in the host country (Devillanova, 2008). As a



**TABLE 3** Employment probability

Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Personal contacts (Ref: no contact)				
Native	0.015 [0.073]	0.038 [0.071]	0.036 [0.068]	0.021 [0.070]
Familial	0.001 [0.051]	0.064 [0.049]	0.049 [0.047]	0.020 [0.046]
Ethnic	0.172*** [0.046]	0.163*** [0.043]	0.154*** [0.042]	0.114*** [0.042]
Female		−0.105** [0.041]	−0.116*** [0.040]	−0.113*** [0.039]
Age		0.057*** [0.012]	0.048*** [0.012]	0.046*** [0.012]
Age <sup>2</sup>		−0.001*** [0.000]	−0.001*** [0.000]	−0.001*** [0.000]
High education		0.092** [0.037]	0.066* [0.036]	0.071** [0.035]
Married		0.014 [0.045]	−0.003 [0.044]	−0.014 [0.045]
Child		−0.029 [0.050]	−0.054 [0.049]	−0.048 [0.049]
Economic motivation		0.106** [0.042]	0.081** [0.040]	0.068* [0.039]
Years since migration (Ref: Ysm > 3)				
Ysm < 1			−0.401*** [0.062]	−0.337*** [0.063]
1 < Ysm < 3			−0.066 [0.044]	−0.044 [0.043]
Impersonal contacts				0.130*** [0.025]
Unemployment rate				−0.127 [0.171]
Area dummies	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
R <sup>2</sup>	0.042	0.161	0.229	0.267
N	632	632	632	632

Notes: Robust standard errors are in parentheses.

\*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

\*\* $p < 0.05$ .

\* $p < 0.1$ .

sensitivity test, we restrict all analyses to recently arrived immigrants (<3 years) and to immigrants with Ysm > 1, which latter also accounts for refugees not being allowed to work during the first 6 months after arrival. As Figure 2 illustrates, the effect of personal contacts on all outcomes is stable across all the different sample specifications, although our inability to directly address this issue with the available data suggests a need for caution in any causal interpretation of the parameters of interest.

## 7 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In this assessment of the effect on legal status of different personal contact types, rather than limiting the focus to specific transitions between legal statuses, we innovatively estimate the association between the personal contacts of immigrant and their documentation probability. We also analyse the indirect effects of personal contacts via employment probability and job characteristics. To this end, our empirical analysis, which employs a unique dataset of documented and undocumented immigrants in the southern Italian region of Calabria, tests three hypotheses on documentation and employment outcomes (H1–H3), the results of which are summarised in Figure 2. First, we identify a marked positive association between personal contacts and documentation probability (H1a), with native (familial) contacts associated with a 20 (10) percentage-point increase in

documentation probability even in the most saturated equation. For ethnic contacts, however, the effect is not only smaller but vanishes once employment is controlled for (panel a, Figure 2). As predicted by H2, this result is seemingly driven by the heterogeneous association between different types of personal contacts and the employment probability. This study may thus be the first to document a differential labour market effect across personal contact types for Italy. Indeed, we also find that whereas neither family nor native contacts exert any substantially significant employment effect, ethnic contacts clearly shape the probability of legal status via a positive effect on employment probability (panel b, Figure 2).

Why do natives and, to a lesser extent, familial contacts correlate positively with the documentation probability once employment status is controlled for? One tentative explanation is advanced in H3, where we conjecture that these contacts are particularly effective at connecting immigrants with better quality occupations, which in turn tend to facilitate access to legalisation programmes. The results for job attributes, reported in panel c of Figure 2, do not provide conclusive evidence in this direction. They show that ethnic contacts are associated with the worst job characteristics. Native contacts correlate with occupations that favour documentation, but the latter association is statistically significant only when we include all available controls. On the whole, these results are consistent with H3. However, we cannot exclude other complementary explanations: for example, the possibility that native contacts might offer better quality

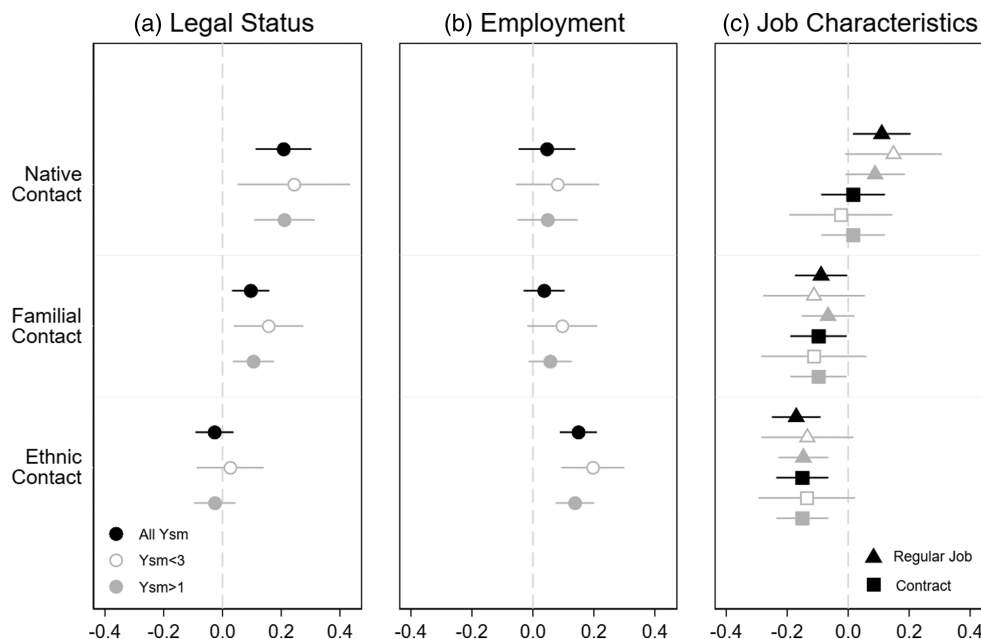
**TABLE 4** Job characteristics

Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Personal contacts (Ref: no contact)								
Native	0.093 [0.073]	0.089 [0.077]	0.105 [0.074]	0.099 [0.070]	0.111 [0.068]	0.101 [0.069]	0.124* [0.069]	0.104 [0.070]
Familial	−0.092 [0.066]	−0.149** [0.070]	−0.045 [0.066]	−0.106 [0.071]	−0.053 [0.064]	−0.115 [0.070]	−0.056 [0.064]	−0.121* [0.071]
Ethnic	−0.132** [0.061]	−0.122* [0.066]	−0.145** [0.060]	−0.133** [0.062]	−0.162*** [0.058]	−0.151** [0.062]	−0.160*** [0.058]	−0.155** [0.063]
Female			0.060 [0.053]	−0.012 [0.058]	0.074 [0.054]	−0.002 [0.058]	0.052 [0.057]	−0.007 [0.061]
Age			0.053*** [0.017]	0.044** [0.018]	0.045*** [0.016]	0.038** [0.017]	0.049*** [0.016]	0.040** [0.018]
Age <sup>2</sup>			−0.001** [0.000]	−0.000* [0.000]	−0.000** [0.000]	−0.000 [0.000]	−0.001*** [0.000]	−0.000* [0.000]
High education			0.065 [0.048]	0.032 [0.053]	0.049 [0.046]	0.026 [0.053]	0.050 [0.046]	0.027 [0.053]
Married			−0.074 [0.053]	−0.039 [0.061]	−0.068 [0.052]	−0.035 [0.061]	−0.068 [0.051]	−0.037 [0.061]
Child			−0.006 [0.058]	−0.115* [0.065]	−0.044 [0.057]	−0.135** [0.065]	−0.040 [0.056]	−0.133** [0.065]
Economic motivation			0.008 [0.058]	−0.018 [0.063]	0.011 [0.058]	−0.026 [0.062]	−0.003 [0.058]	−0.032 [0.064]
Years since migration (Ref: Ysm > 3)								
Ysm < 1					−0.344*** [0.097]	−0.186* [0.110]	−0.345*** [0.096]	−0.185* [0.110]
1 < Ysm < 3					−0.253*** [0.059]	−0.172*** [0.066]	−0.252*** [0.058]	−0.172*** [0.066]
Impersonal contacts							0.032 [0.036]	0.027 [0.043]
Unemployment rate							0.318 [0.260]	0.018 [0.274]
Area dummies	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
R <sup>2</sup>	0.036	0.047	0.112	0.114	0.184	0.140	0.189	0.141
N	367	324	367	324	367	324	367	324

Notes: Robust standard errors are in parentheses.

\*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .\*\* $p < 0.05$ .\* $p < 0.1$ .

**FIGURE 2** Personal contact effects by length of residence. Notes: Symbols denote estimated coefficients (LPM) and line their relative 10% confidence interval. Sample specifications by years since migration (Ysm) are marked by different colours



information than co-ethnic contacts. It may also be the case that those who have native contacts also have a language skills advantage. The existence of other mechanisms is also suggested by the evidence that familial contacts do not connect to better quality occupations. In fact, as highlighted in our literature review, familial contacts are not only likely to provide access to family-reunification visa schemes but might also find other ways to intensely support the immigrants' documentation process and/or strengthen their belief in it. Unfortunately, as before, our data do not permit analysis of these other channels.

Our analysis focuses on a specific geographical context and on a period prior to both the 2008 economic crisis and the so-called European Refugee Crisis. These events dramatically affected the socio-economic environment as well as the composition of the immigrant population. These changes are likely to have had an effect on the relationships under study. Our results do, however, shed interesting new light on the process of migrants' legal and economic integration into a host country. They imply, for example, that the interplay between immigration policies and personal contacts could give rise to cumulative inequality. That is, immigrants without contacts (or with only ethnic contacts) will be less likely to access opportunities for legalisation and end up in poorer quality jobs that lower their chances of acquiring or maintaining legal status. These negative personal contact effects are likely to be exacerbated in legal contexts that give a prominent role to employers and workplace characteristics during legalisation procedures, which again underscores the importance of considering institutional frameworks when addressing the outcomes of social interaction. Our findings, for instance, point to unintended and even unforeseeable consequences of work-related visa schemes and regularisation mechanisms that policymakers should take into account when designing effective immigration policies. In revealing such potential consequences, our study joins a body of scholarship that highlights how contacts within the

same segregated group can limit immigrants' socioeconomic advancement (Portes & Sensenbrenner, 1993).

At the same time, we recognise that the functioning of personal contacts is likely to be context-specific, implying an urgent need to broaden the geographic scope of related research even in the face of serious data availability constraints. By conducting a quantitative analysis of an economically poor southern European region burdened by high migratory pressures and pervasive immigrant irregularity, we take a first step in this direction. Not only is our study of legal status and personal contacts relevant for such environments, it lays a useful analytical foundation for future investigation.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank Lorenzo Cappellari, Francesco Fasani, Tommaso Frattini, Diego Gambetta, Johanna Gereke, Simone Ghislandi, Hannes Kröger, Paolo Pinotti, Max Schaub, participants at Dondena DoReMe (Milan, 2014), Siep (Pavia, 2014), AlpPop (LaThuile, 2015), the MPI-EUI Graduate Workshop (San Domenico di Fiesole, 2015), ECSR (Tallin, 2015), ALUM (Mannheim 2016), and WZB MaD Colloquium (Berlin 2017) and two anonymous reviewers for helpful comments and suggestions. We also thank Fondazione Roberto Franceschi for support and continuous inspiration in our research. The usual disclaimer applies.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Regularisation initiatives have granted legal status to over 5 million individuals in the EU since 1996 (Brick, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Visa overstayers account for up to 70% of undocumented presences in Italy (Fasani, 2010).

- <sup>3</sup> The literature on the effects of personal contacts largely overlaps with studies on social networks and social capital (see Bourdieu, 1980; Coleman, 1988; Durlauf & Ioannides, 2010; Lin, 2001), where the latter is defined as “the ability of actors to secure benefits by virtue of their membership in social networks or other social structures” (Portes, 1998, p. 6).
- <sup>4</sup> In general, personal contacts are expected to alter individuals' desires, beliefs, and opportunities by modifying the costs and benefits associated with the related behaviours (Hedström, 2005). See also DiMaggio and Garip (2012) for a typology of network effect mechanisms.
- <sup>5</sup> Legal entry under visa sponsorship schemes, common in major immigration countries, conditions the issuance and/or renewal of a residence permit on having an employer willing to support the application. Employment-based legalisation programs and mechanisms (Brick, 2011) are particularly likely in European (Chauvin et al., 2013) and especially southern European countries (Kraler, 2009). Employment requirements also played an important role in the United States, where the 1986 IRCA-SAW program legalised over 1.2 million unauthorised immigrants conditional on their having been employed in the agricultural sector.
- <sup>6</sup> In general, the identification of causal relations for personal contacts is extremely demanding in terms of data and/or experimental variation (Blume, Brock, Durlauf, & Ioannides, 2011; Mouw, 2006). This fact, together with a distressing scarcity of suitable data, explains why, other than the notable exceptions of Kanas et al. (2011, 2012) and Kalter and Kogan (2014), causal evidence from the European context remains limited. Studies based on impersonal contacts—measured by the spatial proximity of individuals similar in ethnicity, language, or country of origin—do provide more causal evidence of a positive effect on immigrants' employment probabilities and earnings but allow no differentiation between contact types (Damm, 2014; Martén, Hainmueller, & Hangartner, 2019).
- <sup>7</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, the data used in this section are drawn from the Italian National Institute of Statistics (<http://dati.istat.it/>), accessed in October 2016.
- <sup>8</sup> See Fasani (2010) for an account of Italian immigration law and for data on trajectories of entrance and regularisation.
- <sup>9</sup> Mass legalisation programs in 1986, 1990, 1995, 1998, 2002, 2009, and 2012 legalised approximately 1.85 million immigrants, a very large number for a country that hosted about 3.6 million documented immigrants in 2012.
- <sup>10</sup> We thank Domenico Marino and Dario Musolino for providing us with information on the sampling procedure.
- <sup>11</sup> The five main national groups are the same for the subsample of documented immigrants and coincide with those obtained from the official statistics on residence permits in Calabria in 2007 (Istat, 2016). The gender composition and age structure of the two samples are also roughly the same.
- <sup>12</sup> For example, people might have no contact prior to migrating and then form contacts after arrival. Conversely, individuals might lose the contacts they had before migrating.
- <sup>13</sup> We have checked the robustness of our findings to using probit or logit regression models. Results are available upon request.
- <sup>14</sup> Unfortunately, our dataset provides no information on Italian language proficiency.
- <sup>15</sup> The provincial figures for the unemployment rate and foreign presence by nationality come from Istat (2008a and 2008b, respectively). Foreigner presence is derived from the official residential register and thus refers to documented immigrants only.
- <sup>16</sup> We replicated all the results on employment probability and job search characteristic on the full survey sample (including immigrants from European and Schengen countries) and obtained robust results.
- <sup>17</sup> Given Durand, Massey, and Pren's (2016) evidence of an association between being undocumented and the worst labour market outcomes, we also run a specification that includes individual legal status. Although the results are qualitatively similar, the number of undocumented immigrants with regular employment and/or an employment contract is very low, rendering the estimates less precise.
- <sup>18</sup> As an additional test, we use monthly wages (four wage brackets) and obtain consistent results. Note, however, that the sample shows low wage variability: 80% of those employed earned less than €800 per month.

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**How to cite this article:** Cremaschi S, Devillanova C.

Immigrants and legal status: Do personal contacts matter?

*Popul Space Place*. 2020;e2383. <https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.2383>