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# How Today's Immigration Enforcement Policies Impact Children, Families, and Communities

A View from the Ground

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Joanna Dreby

August 2012



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Documenting the Undocumented Series

*This report is the third in a Center for American Progress series that looks at the daily lives, struggles, and strategies of undocumented immigrants who must live through the assault of harsh laws designed to make their lives unbearable. Throughout 2012 we will release reports that lift the veil on our nation's undocumented, providing a window into the lives of the 11 million who live in the United States without papers and how our nation's immigration policies impact us all—documented or not.*

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# Introduction and summary

What happens to children when their parents are deported? How do these deportations, now more numerous than ever,<sup>1</sup> affect families and the communities in which they live? This report looks at how immigration enforcement shapes family life in the United States, both among immigrant and mixed-status families, and in their wider communities.

Even as the United States has failed to pass comprehensive immigration reform in the past decade, it has increasingly taken a hardline stance on immigration enforcement, particularly in targeting unauthorized immigrants living in the country.<sup>2</sup>

The number of immigrants removed has steadily risen, from close to 190,000 deportations in 2001 to close to 400,000 per year in the past four years.<sup>3</sup> Even more troubling, in the first six months of 2011 alone, more than 46,000 parents of U.S. citizen children were deported.<sup>4</sup>

With more than 11 million unauthorized immigrants living in the country, these deportations affect a wide swath of the population,<sup>5</sup> including the undocumented and the citizen alike. Undocumented immigrants do not live separate and walled-off lives from the documented, but instead live side by side in the same communities and in the same families. A total of 16.6 million people currently live in mixed-status families—with at least one unauthorized immigrant—and a third of U.S. citizen children of immigrants live in mixed-status families.<sup>6</sup>

Additionally, having citizen children or even being the primary provider for U.S. citizen children is little help in removal proceedings: A recent report by the NYU School of Law's Immigrant Rights Clinic found that between 2005 and 2010, 87 percent of processed cases in New York City of individuals with citizen children resulted in deportation.<sup>7</sup>

As individuals face the threat of deportation,<sup>8</sup> ripple effects split families and entire communities apart.

We argue in this report that deportations break families up and have a wider effect on the community as a whole—not just the individual and the family involved.

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## Deportations rip apart families

Deportations have a large effect on families, forcing children into foster care as their parents are shipped out of the country and leaving single mothers struggling to make ends meet.

- **They leave children in foster care.** As the Applied Research Council has found, many U.S. citizen children of undocumented deportees may end up in the foster care system, often for no other reason than the undocumented status of a parent. Legal status complicates reunifications, placing the burden for the care of these children on state and federal governments. The total costs to foster each child (between administrative and maintenance costs) are significant—close to \$26,000 per year.<sup>9</sup>
- **They create a large number of single mothers struggling to make ends meet.** While many single parents in the United States face similar circumstances, in this case it is the government’s own policies that create the conditions for single parenthood. In addition, the tenuous legal status of many parents left behind adds a double burden on these families to provide for their families while also raising their children.

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## Deportations affect communities, as well as families

Deportations’ consequences ripple out from those individuals with a family member that has been deported, affecting the larger community as well. This research finds that the knowledge alone that deportations are occurring in one’s community puts children and families—and thus entire communities—on edge and heightens fears about family separation.

- **Children and their parents live in constant fear of separation.** Often children who do not know anyone deported still fear for their own families based on the knowledge that they could be separated at a moment’s notice.

This research finds that the knowledge alone that deportations are occurring in one’s community puts children and families—and thus entire communities—on edge and heightens fears about family separation.

- **Because of fears of deportation, children routinely conflate the police with immigration officials.** This is true even in areas where local law enforcement have no official agreements to work with the Department of Homeland Security. These children—who are U.S. citizens—grow up afraid of the police.
- **Children begin to associate all immigrants with illegal status, regardless of their own identity or legal status.** As a result, children are dissociating themselves with their immigrant heritage.

To better support children and families, we make the following policy recommendations:

- **Enact a commonsense and comprehensive policy change.** In the long term only comprehensive immigration reform with a pathway to earned legalization for unauthorized immigrants can grant security to parents and children in mixed-status families. Children need not be afraid that their family will be broken up due to irregular statuses. They must not learn to be ashamed of their immigrant heritage.
- **Modest legislative fixes can help as well.** On July 16, 2012, Rep. Lucille Roybal-Allard (D-CA) introduced the Help Separated Families Act, H.R. 6128, to ensure that children are not taken away from their relatives simply because of their parents' immigration status. In July 2011 Sen. Al Franken (D-MN) and Rep. Lynn Woolsey (D-CA) introduced the Humane Enforcement and Legal Protections for Separated Children Act, which would mandate standards for immigration enforcement when children are involved. The bill would ensure that parents are kept informed of and are able to continue to make decisions about the care of their children, and that the interests of the children are taken into account in detention, release, or transfers. Passing these bills would go a long way toward preventing children from ending up in foster care while their family members are detained or deported.<sup>10</sup>
- **Expand executive action.** In the short term administrative action can greatly alleviate threats to immigrant families. President Barack Obama can and should allow parents, especially those supporting U.S. citizen children, to stay in the country if they have committed no crimes and are only guilty of the civil offense of being in the country without status.<sup>11</sup>

In this report we focus specifically on children in Mexican immigrant households, as enforcement policies disproportionately affect them. Mexicans are approxi-

mately 30 percent of the foreign-born population and 58 percent of the unauthorized population in the United States.<sup>12</sup> In 2010, however, Mexicans comprised 83 percent of the detained, 73 percent of those forcibly removed, and 77 percent of voluntary departures.<sup>13</sup> More than 7 million children in the United States live with parents from Mexico, and half of these children are estimated to be U.S. citizens living with noncitizen parents.<sup>14</sup>

This report draws on findings from the author's ethnographic study with Mexican immigrant families in two sites—one in central New Jersey and the other in northeast Ohio. The data include in-depth interviews with 110 children and 91 parents, and home and school visits with 12 families. Similarities in family members' experiences, even across two vastly different local contexts, illustrates that the results reported here are likely true for children living in other settings around the country.<sup>15</sup>

Certainly the deportation of people who have committed certain serious crimes and are threats to our national security will inevitably break up families. But there are ways to recognize the importance of family unification and to mitigate the devastating effects of deportation—especially for those who have committed no crimes, save for the civil penalty of being in the country without status.

# Ramped-up immigration enforcement and deportation in the United States

Over the past few years, the United States has ratcheted up the number of people it removes from the country each year.<sup>16</sup> The nearly 400,000 people deported each year since 2009 represents more than twice the 189,000 deported in 2001.<sup>17</sup>

Mexicans are the most adversely affected by such policies. While they are not the only group to be unauthorized—nor are all Mexican immigrants unauthorized<sup>18</sup>—they are overrepresented in apprehensions, detentions, removals, and returns.<sup>19</sup>

And while the president’s June 15 announcement granting deferred action to DREAM Act-eligible youth will go a long way to protecting unauthorized children from deportation, the program is of no help to their parents.<sup>20</sup>

Other programs of prosecutorial discretion such as the one announced in the summer of 2011, meant to prioritize resources toward deporting criminals first and foremost—have not lived up to their promises. A recent study by Syracuse University found that only 1.9 percent of pending deportation cases have been closed because of the this program.<sup>21</sup>

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## Shifts in immigrant settlement patterns

A national emphasis on enforcement coincides with a major shift in patterns of Mexican migration to and from the United States. In the past Mexican migration was primarily seasonal and temporary, but since the 1990s settlement has sharply increased.<sup>22</sup> Mexican immigrants today live in various types of settled families:

- 3.5 million U.S. citizen children have noncitizen Mexican parents.
- 755,000 noncitizen Mexican children have parents who are also noncitizens.
- 79,000 noncitizen Mexican children have parents who are U.S. citizens,<sup>23</sup> but those children are likely to be on backlogged waiting lists to naturalize. Some



may be permanently stuck without a pathway to legalization based on immigration re-entry bars of either three years or 10 years, depending on how long they have been in the country without status.<sup>24</sup>

With the economic recession, jobs in the United States have dried up; new inflows of people from Mexico have ceased.<sup>25</sup> Nonetheless, the Mexican American unauthorized population continues to grow, and with it the number of mixed-status families—those with at least one unauthorized resident and one U.S. citizen.

In the 1980s and 1990s, most growth in the Mexican population in the United States was due to immigration; between 2000 and 2010 the Mexican American population in the United States primarily grew as a result of new births.<sup>26</sup> This shift attests to an unprecedented number of young people who will likely be affected by U.S. enforcement policies.

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## Local effects of enforcement

Immigration policy is under federal jurisdiction, but the consequences are felt locally.

Between 2009 and 2011 the author completed an ethnographic study in Ohio and New Jersey. Both are newer destinations for Mexican migrants—places where Mexican communities did not exist prior to the 1990s. Neither site has been plagued by the overt tensions fueled by a specific controversy over unauthorized migration. At the time of the study, for example, neither had signed an agreement under section 287(g) of the Immigration and Nationality Act—which deputizes local law enforcement to act as immigration officials, something usually reserved for federal officers—or participated in the Secure Communities program. Yet the characteristics of each site—and the Mexican communities within them—vary considerably.

In the midsize urban area of the site in northeast Ohio, the Mexican community is small and relatively invisible. It is an economically depressed region that has suffered severe job loss with deindustrialization. Most Mexicans work in the food service industry or in area factories. Some men work in construction and some women in domestic service. Families live dispersed throughout the city and surrounding suburbs. Small businesses catering to Latinos are scattered, often located in strip malls. Mexicans enjoy relatively low housing costs. Most rent their own homes or apartments on minimum-wage incomes. Many mothers choose not

to work, a decision they described as more affordable than child care. Children attend schools with very few other Latino children. Most are the only Mexican children in their grades, if not in their schools.

In the more bustling site in a midsize city in central New Jersey, the declining industries of the 1970s and 1980s were replaced by growths in manufacturing, as well as a vibrant service sector—especially in landscaping and construction. This attracted many Mexican migrants in the 1990s and 2000s. Of the approximately 50,000 city residents, 33 percent are foreign born and 39 percent are Hispanic.<sup>27</sup> Many residents call one area of the midsize city “Little Mexico,” as nearly every storefront boasts Spanish names.

Most Mexicans in this area are relatively low-wage workers surviving in a community where the cost of living is high. They typically double up, with two or three families in each housing unit. Both mothers and fathers work, often at alternate times so they do not have to pay for child care. At one district elementary school, 80 percent of students have Mexican immigrant parents.

Mexican families across America face challenges as they navigate differing local environments. In some places, such as the site in New Jersey, they have access to transportation and translation or interpretation services, which greatly improve their access to social services in the area. In other places, such as the study site in Ohio, Mexican families are more isolated.

Yet in both types of settings, Mexican immigrant families describe confrontations with local law enforcement as being an area of great concern. Community members in each site are highly aware of and carefully monitor their relationships with police and other law enforcement agencies, as the rest of this report will show.

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## Methodology

This report draws from the author’s interviews with 91 parents and 110 children in northeast Ohio (between 2009 and 2011) and central New Jersey (from 2011 to 2012). The local context is crucial, but in this report we focus on the experiences that were similar for families in New Jersey and Ohio. The cross-site comparison identifies themes that may apply to Mexican children living elsewhere.<sup>28</sup>

The study purposefully sampled different types of families, including those in which children were U.S. born, legal migrants, and undocumented, as well as parents in the same three categories. The author interviewed parents and children in a total of 80 families. Of the parents, 63 were undocumented, 18 were legal migrants, and 10 were U.S. born. Of the children, 31 were undocumented, 8 were legal migrants, and 71 were U.S. born. Sixteen families described experiences with detention or deportation.<sup>29</sup>

In addition, the author did home and school visits with a smaller group of 12 families. This allowed for observation of the children in these families, as well as other children interviewed in their neighborhoods and schools. Contact with families outside the interview setting contextualized the information gathered in interviews.<sup>30</sup>

# Direct effects: Deportation's disastrous consequences for families

We first turn to the direct effects that deportations have on families. It is important to note that even in the vastly different local contexts of Ohio and New Jersey (particularly in light of the differing approaches by local law enforcement toward immigration), this report finds that children in both places experience similar consequences of enforcement policies.

Children are most directly affected when a parent is arrested, detained, or deported. These forced separations mean an abrupt shift from living with two parents to living with just one. For some children, the experience of living with one parent may be short lived; parents typically try to reunite as soon as possible. Some do so by returning to Mexico, but many U.S. citizen children remain in the United States, where their families attempt to reunite by returning to America.<sup>31</sup> For others, there may be more longstanding effects even after the family has been reunited, as financial and emotional hardships rarely vanish even after the immediate trauma of such an event. Finally, for some children, a parent's deportation leads to a permanent change in their family structure and, in extreme cases, family dissolution.<sup>32</sup>

It is important to note that deportation is a gendered process. While the Department of Homeland Security does not release the gender composition of deportees, research suggests that, in most cases, men are the ones who are arrested, detained, and deported.<sup>33</sup> A recent report on Secure Communities by the Warren Institute of the University of California, Berkeley, found that 93 percent of detainees under the program were male, even though only 57 percent of the unauthorized population is such.<sup>34</sup> Researchers Brotherton and Barrios interviewed Dominican deportees and found that 84 percent were male,<sup>35</sup> while Hondagneu-Sotelo and Golash-Boza report that studies in Mexico estimate that 89 percent of those who are repatriated are male.<sup>36</sup>

Thus these incidents do not just result in single parenthood but single motherhood. Nationwide, children in single-parent households are 4.2 times more likely to live in poverty than are children with married parents. The poverty rate for

single-mother families is 40.7 percent, compared to just 24.2 percent for single-father families.<sup>37</sup> Enforcement policies leave women—more so than men—in extremely vulnerable situations.

Here we examine both the immediate effects of deportations on families, as well as their long-term consequences.

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## Families torn apart

Most of the mothers the author met successfully kept their families together after a deportation or detention, but one-quarter were unable to. For these families, a deportation marks a permanent change in the composition of the household.<sup>38</sup> Children may be placed in foster care, the mother may become a single mother, or the family may try to return to Mexico.

### Children placed in foster care

One of the biggest fears that families expressed in interviews is that parents may lose custody of their U.S.-born citizen children as a result of a detention or deportation. The author asked a 12-year-old girl, “What scares you?” She replied:

*I don't know ... maybe they're gonna report you. You know on the news they say they report them. And then the kids stay here, but they get adopted.*<sup>39</sup>

Later in the interview she went on to explain:

*Yea, 'cause I'm scared, 'cause maybe one day, they take her [Mom], and maybe we're at the mall, or we're walking around. Just leave us all by yourself, like what happened when this girl ... just because she went to the store to buy diapers ... and her daughter that was 10 or 11, they said that they took her.*<sup>40</sup>

This concern is not simply hypothetical. A recent report by the Applied Research Council estimates that at least 5,100 children are currently in the U.S. foster care system and cannot be reunited with their parents due to a parents' detention or deportation—and 15,000 more could face similar circumstances in the next five years. On average it costs state and federal governments just under \$26,000 per

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year to foster a child (between maintenance and administrative costs), so this glut of entries into the foster system does not come cheaply.<sup>41</sup>

The Applied Research Council report details three pathways by which children of deportees end up in foster care.

1. Some parents are deported after they have been involved with Child Protective Services and are then reported to Immigration and Customs Enforcement, the agency involved in investigating immigration cases. It is important to note that being involved with Child Protective Services does not expressly mean that children suffered abuse in the households: Seventy-two percent of child welfare issues involving Child Protective Services come from neglect rather than actual abuse, and, as the Applied Research Council report illustrates, oftentimes the neglect can be synonymous with poverty, as it becomes difficult to adequately feed or clothe the child.<sup>42</sup>
2. Other times, the initial report of abuse or neglect leads to the discovery of the undocumented status. Such was the case of a California father who was deported after leaving his children with a babysitter, who then left them unattended. Police responded to call and arrested him. He was subsequently deported.<sup>43</sup>
3. But, most troubling, many parents have never had a reason to be involved with Child Protective Services but still lose their children because of an immigration violation. In these cases many Child Protective Services view the tenuous nature of unauthorized status as a reason to place the children with a foster family. This happened to a mother in Tucson, Arizona, who was arrested for driving without a license. If she had been a U.S. citizen, she would have been released the same day and returned to her children. But when she was detained and held for Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials, her children were left unattended overnight, which was viewed by the state as being neglected, and they ended up in the foster care system. The source of the “neglect” was the mother’s arrest and prolonged detention by police, who kept her in custody for Immigration and Customs Enforcement.<sup>44</sup>

It is the final scenario that parents and children fear the most: Parents will lose custody of their children—not for being bad parents but due solely to their undocumented status.

## Moises: Children fear being separated from their parents

One fifth grader, Moises—born in Mexico but came to New Jersey when he was 1 year old and does not remember living anywhere else—eloquently explained the fears that both parents and children harbor about foster care. The 10-year-old lives with his parents, an 8-year-old citizen brother, two aunts and uncles, and four cousins. His father has worked in New Jersey for more than 20 years, only bringing his family to the United States with him after Moises was born because he no longer wanted to be separated from his son. Moises has only attended schools in the United States, and, although he speaks Spanish so that he can communicate with his mother, he prefers English.

“Have the police ever been here?” the author asked.

“My dad got a ticket. He needed to show his license,” he replied. “He still had it. They didn’t say ‘Let me see the papers.’ They just said, ‘Let me see the license.’ He was lucky!”

“Do you ever talk to your parents about it? What do they tell you when you tell them you’re scared?” the author continued.

“That that’s how life is. That’s how life is when someone doesn’t have the papers. You have to go to the country you were born in. And you never go back to America.”

“Do you think it will be really hard if you had to go back? What would happen to your brother if you went back?”

He paused for a moment, sober, and then answered, “He’ll just have to take care of himself. Maybe they’ll adopt him.”<sup>45</sup>

### Single-parent households

Single parenthood is financially and emotionally costly for children.<sup>46</sup> But it is especially costly and devastating when it is the result of a deportation, as these cases illustrate.

Perla’s oldest daughter was an infant the first time her ex-husband was arrested. Accused of a gang-related assault, he awaited trial in prison. As a new mother suffering from post-partum depression, Perla struggled, so she moved in with her in-laws, who supported her even though she was angry with her husband and considered this period a trial separation.

When the evidence against him was found insufficient, he was released. They reconciled. Yet the relationship was tumultuous, as he became physically and emotionally abusive. “Sometimes I ended up sleeping all alone on the floor of the room,” she explained.

Pregnant with their second child, Perla stayed with him. Then he was arrested again. This time he was found guilty, served a five-year sentence, and was deported.

Perla resolved, at first, to wait for him, but with time she gained perspective on his abuse and moved on. She does not talk to her ex-husband, and he has no relationship with his two daughters.

The deportation of Perla's ex-husband may be viewed as a blessing in disguise because she was ultimately able to get out of an abusive relationship. Yet Perla struggled as a single mother. She worked two jobs, one at a gas station in the mornings and another cleaning at night. She would not be able to afford her one-room apartment if her younger brother had not moved in with her. She also depended on him for child care. Although her ex-husband's family supported her during both of his incarcerations, they have all but disappeared since he was deported. "Only once did his brother come and take the girls out to eat." Perla's ex-husband only called from Mexico once, but he did not seem to know what to say and has not called back since.<sup>47</sup>

Gladys's story is similar. Her husband was deported after he was arrested for involvement in illicit business activities. Gladys described him, too, as being abusive, and her life turned upside down after his arrest. Before he was deported, she was a stay-at-home mother. They had separated once temporarily, but Gladys's husband supported her financially. With his arrest, however, she was on her own. She began to work an afternoon shift.

When interviewed three years later, Gladys saw her children, ages 14 and 7, only a few hours per day during the week.<sup>48</sup> Her ex-husband occasionally called from Mexico, but 14-year-old Marjorie had little to say about her father. "I don't really have much contact with him," she said. Her 7-year-old brother said, "I just say hi and pass it [the phone] on to my sister."<sup>49</sup>

When temporarily separated from their children, due to incarceration in Perla's case and a trial separation in Gladys's case, both fathers remained in contact with their children. As deportees, neither did. In the absence of economic ties to their children, the fathers' emotional connections faltered.

The separation of fathers from their children is not all that uncommon. But research shows that when fathers voluntarily migrate, they maintain contact with their children via regular phone calls, gift giving, and remittances.<sup>50</sup> Children still feel resentful toward their fathers for leaving, but their fathers remain a part of their lives, much the same as a divorced father who shares custody and visits with his children regularly.



Deportation, in contrast, severs paternal bonds with children. Scholarship shows that deportees face high levels of stigma upon their returns; they are viewed as failed migrants and oftentimes as criminals, even if the deportation had nothing to do with a criminal offense. Deportees have trouble finding stable work, and they cannot support their children from their home countries. They are also demoralized.<sup>51</sup>

While many American families face single parenthood, in this case it is the actions of the federal government that make the families so. Likewise, the precarious legal status of many of the parents left behind leaves a double burden on these families.

### Repatriation to Mexico

Children and parents fear adoption due to a deportation, but an equally likely scenario—at least according to the families interviewed for this report—is that the entire family returns to Mexico. This is what self-deportation advocates want. By making life extremely difficult for unauthorized migrants here, some hope they will return home, taking their U.S.-born children with them.

For these folks a return to Mexico is a success story. But Sofia's experiences show why a return to Mexico is not a story of triumph but rather one of defeat—one in which U.S.-born children's lives are negatively affected, and their educational opportunities are curtailed.

The author first met Sofia after Immigration and Customs Enforcement released her from a detention center. At the time, Sofia was struggling to support her four U.S.-born citizen children after her husband had been deported.

Sofia's problems started when local police detained her and her husband one night when they went to Wal-Mart for diapers. They had left the couple's four children with Sofia's brother, who lived with them. The arresting officer said Sofia's husband had not stopped at a stop sign in the parking lot. The couple was taken to the local jail for two days before being sent to an immigration facility. They got word home about what happened, but Sofia was not able to talk to her children for the four days she was detained. A friend went for the children and sent a lawyer to get Sofia released. Sofia's husband was deported directly to Mexico.<sup>52</sup> Sofia was released with an ankle monitor strapped to her leg to keep track of her whereabouts until her next court date, when her deportation would be ordered.

While many American families face single parenthood, in this case it is the actions of the federal government that make the families so. Likewise, the precarious legal status of many of the parents left behind leaves a double burden on these families.

Sofia's children knew little about life in Mexico other than the accounts from their mother. When the author asked her 8-year-old daughter if she had an idea of what life was like in Mexico, she answered simply, in a hushed voice, "Nope." The 6-year-old was even harder to interview; she had a speech impediment and had been born with a birth defect. Still, due to early intervention and extra help at school, by age 6 she was able to talk—just not at length with a stranger. She smiled and nodded "yes" or "no" instead in response to the questions.

The oldest, age 12, verbalized more of what she knew of Mexico, which was secondhand accounts from the stories her mother told.

*It's poor there ... my mom tells me about how she lived and that when her shoes ripped, they had to buy it, but maybe like a year.*<sup>53</sup>

Sofia wanted to stay in the United States, saying that, "I don't want to go, that is what I am going to say [to immigration judge], that I don't want to go. Here I have the means to give things to my children, and there [in Mexico], no, there I don't have anything, not a house, nothing."<sup>54</sup>

She could have tried to fight the deportation, and with a good lawyer she might have been eligible for a waiver of deportation based on her daughter's disability. But she was still afraid that she would be deported, and that her children would be stuck without her in the United States. She said:

*I am not leaving without my children because I don't want to leave them here. Because I have seen on the news how they take them away, and I don't want that. I don't know, I mean, you see I don't have enough money right now. But I feed them from the food I have, they have enough to eat. I am not going to leave them.*<sup>55</sup>

Ultimately Sofia decided to return with her children to her parents' rural home in Chiapas, Mexico, a home she left because there was no work. Her husband remained in a neighboring town in the home of his own parents. It took her months, however, to orchestrate a return. "What I want to do is to get their passports and then send them first ... that is my decision," she explained.<sup>56</sup> But she did not have enough money for the passports and flights, and she had to scramble and borrow funds over the next four months before she finally left with her children. All four did not speak Spanish well, having been educated in U.S. schools for all of their lives.

A return to Mexico can be very disruptive for U.S.-born children, who have been raised in the United States. The Pew Hispanic Center estimates that 300,000

U.S.-born children have moved from the United States to Mexico since 2005.<sup>57</sup> Research shows U.S.-citizen children who return to Mexico with their deported parents feel like exiles. One teenage girl reported to researcher Deborah Boehm, for example, that, “At home, I was on the phone all the time or texting. Now we don’t even have phone reception. I hate school. I even got in a fight with another student. I’m glad I can be with my mother, but I wish I were back in the U.S.”<sup>58</sup>

U.S.-born children who move to Mexico with their parents are also deprived of the benefits of U.S. citizenship such as access to health care and insurance.<sup>59</sup> Sofia’s 6-year-old daughter, for example, will no longer receive speech therapy in her school, and she will have to learn to read and write in Spanish, something that will be difficult for her in a rural school with few educational resources.

U.S.-citizen children who have previously attended schools in the United States suffer when they return to school in Mexico; the transitions between school systems are not easy, and they are especially difficult in rural areas.<sup>60</sup> Children who return to Mexico find adjusting to the educational system to be a challenge, both in terms of language and access issues and in discrimination against the children of returnees.<sup>61</sup> Not only is the return disruptive, but it robs the United States of these children’s future potential and productivity, losing out on the talent of native-born citizens.

Perhaps most disturbing is the permanent loss of U.S.-citizen children’s aspirations when they return to Mexico. Sofia’s 12-year-old daughter, a U.S. citizen, dreamed of being a lawyer. “When she grows up, she says she is going to study, and that she wants to be a lawyer, that she can help Hispanics,” explained Sofia. “Since I talk with her about how we used to live over there [Mexico], she doesn’t want to go. I tell her that I don’t want her to go through the same things that I went through when I was a little girl because I grew up in the countryside.”<sup>62</sup>

Sofia, similar to most parents, wanted to provide a better future for her children than the one she had—that’s why she came to the United States in the first place. The return to Mexico represents the defeat of that dream. Yet the return also represents the end of her daughter’s dreams for the future.

Not only is the return disruptive, but it robs the United States of these children’s future potential and productivity, losing out on the talent of native-born citizens.

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## Long-term consequences

### The economic fallout

The economic fallout of a deportation is perhaps the most significant of the long-term consequences of immigration enforcement. Being thrust from a family in which a father is the primary breadwinner to one in which a mother is the sole provider has a large impact on children's daily lives. Unlike when a husband is laid off or hurt at work, sudden single mothers cannot rely on unemployment or worker's compensation. And because many are undocumented, they cannot apply for welfare or food stamps for themselves and their families.

But while their U.S.-citizen children are eligible for social service benefits, research shows that undocumented parents underuse the social services available to their children due to their fears of disclosing their legal status in the application process—for example taking up preschool education or community health services. Other parents wrongly believe using social services at a young age would hinder their children's ability to get future benefits such as student loans.<sup>63</sup>

As Harvard Professor Hirokazu Yoshikawa has illustrated, this avoidance of social services results in far lower enrollment rates in programs such as child care or food stamps that can help their children's early cognitive development, a process that greatly influences children's abilities and achievements throughout the rest of their lives.<sup>64</sup>

Prior to a detention or deportation, families constitute a class of low-wage workers. With a detention or deportation, families slip easily into poverty. For families experiencing a detention or deportation, household income drops drastically from one day to the next, which is a shock for families already getting by on low wages. Of the 16 cases of deportation in this study, every single one described financial hardship as a direct consequence of their partner's detention or deportation. Mothers scrambled to find enough work and arrange for child care. "However it turns out, one suffers so, so much," explained one mother whose husband had been deported twice.<sup>65</sup>

Even mothers who continue to live with their spouses described the financial impacts from these enforcement acts. Clara lives with her husband in northeast Ohio. Two years ago he was detained, but he refused to sign the voluntary removal

form and was never actually deported. After a nine-day stint in detention, Clara managed to find a lawyer to have him released. Clara had to come up with \$5,000 for bail and then another \$5,000 in legal fees over the next few years. Clara borrowed money to pay off the debts they had accrued. During an interview with the author two years later, she said, “Right now, we are in the red. ... sometimes we don’t have enough even for food.”<sup>66</sup>

A related impact is housing insecurity. One mother, for example, relocated eight times with her two children in the three years after her husband’s deportation.<sup>67</sup> Another had to move in with her sister: After her husband was deported, she could no longer afford their two-bedroom condo on her salary as a restaurant hostess alone.<sup>68</sup> A third woman could not pay the rent after her husband was incarcerated for a speeding ticket; she was only able to stay in the house where she lived with her two U.S. citizen children because the landlord, also her husband’s former boss, allowed her to skip paying the rent.<sup>69</sup>

Sofia was detained with her husband, who was deported; she was eventually released, with the help of a lawyer, to her U.S. citizen children. When she returned home with the ankle monitor locked around her leg, her cousins—who shared her home with her—moved out because they did not want to risk Immigration and Customs Enforcement finding them there. She fell behind on the rent, unable to afford the four-bedroom home on her own.<sup>70</sup>

It is also costly for mothers to orchestrate the reunification of their families. One struggled for months to save enough money for each of her four children’s passports in order to be able to take them back with her to her husband, who was previously deported, in Mexico.<sup>71</sup> Another wanted to stay in the United States with her three U.S.-born children, but the hours at her factory job had been cut back, and she was not able to make ends meet. She decided that the best recourse was to return to Mexico. Still, she did not have enough money saved. She explained:

*It’s just that right now I cannot leave because they don’t have their passports and then ... the baby ... he doesn’t have his social security number yet. You see, I have to get the social security card in order to apply for his passport. You see the problem?<sup>72</sup>*

Although the financial consequences are the most striking, as these cases illustrate, mothers also face a tremendous amount of stress figuring out how to reunify and support their families financially during a husband’s absence.

## Emotional stress

The stress of a separation is felt by all members of a family. Mothers take on the burdens of family subsistence. They also may withdraw, traumatized by the intrusion of the government into their families. Vanessa, for example, said, “I don’t feel safe talking to the police ... sometimes I want to dye my hair blond and have blue eyes.”<sup>73</sup>

But the emotional stress for children, who are often less verbal, is especially disturbing. A report by the Urban Institute found numerous changes in behavior among children whose parents were detained or deported, as reported by their families, including increased frequency of crying, loss of appetite, sleeplessness, clingy behavior, and an increase in fear and anxiety.

A large literature on child development shows the detrimental effects that such anxieties and the overall social environment can have on early childhood development, and with it these children’s future successes, including things such as school achievements and earnings as adults. Ensuring the successful development of all citizen children, regardless of their parents’ immigration status, should be paramount.<sup>74</sup>

Parents repeatedly reported how distressed their children were during the periods of their husbands’ detentions or deportations. Although many described their children as too young to really understand what had happened, young children interviewed expressed awareness of the circumstances surrounding a deportation.

Women also described the trauma their partners experienced after a deportation or detainment. Vanessa explained how hard it was for her husband back in Mexico:

*You see, in your country, when you go back, everyone adores you. But he arrived [back to his hometown] and everything was bad, and he was ashamed. He almost never went out of the house. He felt awful. He didn’t have money.*<sup>75</sup>

Maria’s Honduran husband also felt defeated after he was deported to Mexico. The day of his arrival, he was robbed and had his Mexican ID stolen. She said:

*They were going to deport him all the way to Honduras, and I said to him, “Here; I have some copies of the IDs,” and I said, “I will send you the papers.” And he said, “What for?” I told him, “I sent a copy to my father so that he can go and get you wherever you are, or give me a fax number, something where I can send some proof, the children’s birth certificates that prove you are their father or our wedding certificate. That way they can let you go.” He said, “No, don’t do anything.”*<sup>76</sup>

The stress of a separation is felt by all members of a family. Mothers take on the burdens of family subsistence. But the emotional stress for children, who are often less verbal, is especially disturbing.

## Daily routines

Aside from the long-term financial and emotional consequences, a detention or deportation directly affects families' lives on a more minute level by drastically altering their daily routines. Again, many of the issues that newly single immigrant parents face are similar to those faced by other single parents, but the trauma of having a loved one deported, coupled with their own precarious legal statuses, makes their situation doubly disadvantaged.

For one, suddenly single mothers described crises with child care. To illustrate: One mother entered the workforce for the first time in 12 years after her husband was imprisoned and then deported. Her daughter Marjorie, 11 years old at the time, became the primary child care provider for her 4-year-old brother in the after-school hours. Now 14 years old, the teenager explained, "My mom started working when I was in fifth grade. So I've been pretty much taking care of my brother since like fifth grade ... it was a lot harder for me because I never really experienced my mom going to work."

At the end of the interview, when asked how she thought that immigration affected young people, Marjorie added:

*I guess it's hard for us because my mom can't really get an official professional job. So I guess, not trying to sound negative, but we're probably gonna have money problems most of the time. Maybe until I can work or something ... I don't know. I've noticed that many Hispanic kids, they grow up faster than white kids ... because most Hispanic kids and their parents, well, both their parents are working. So we usually have to grow up faster than usual kids do.<sup>77</sup>*

# Wider ramifications: Deportation's destabilizing effects on children and communities

Enforcement actions have a devastating impact on families, tearing parents and children apart and leaving a slew of economic and psychological trauma in their wake. They also potentially deny U.S.-citizen children the rights other children born in America enjoy—to live in stable families with their parents.

Yet this is not the full story. Focusing solely on these acts of deportation obscures the insidious effects deportation policies have had on a much larger segment of the population. Interviews with children and families show that it is crucial to look past the experiences of families in which parents have been either detained or deported. Even children in families who never have had a family member in Immigration and Customs Enforcement custody talk about the possibility of being separated from their parents, equate immigration with illegality, and associate a stigma with immigrant status.

The threat of deportation has significant consequences on children, their families, and entire communities, introducing instability and insecurity into the lives of thousands of children growing up in the United States.<sup>78</sup>

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## Fears of separation

Research shows that the threat of deportation affects entire communities, with members avoiding public spaces and feeling afraid to interact with the police.<sup>79</sup> Communitywide fears seep into the consciousness of children, many of whom are U.S. citizens, despite parents' best efforts to shield their children from these types of distresses that are ultimately out of their control.

These fears were perhaps best illustrated in May 2010, in the wake of the passage of Arizona's anti-immigrant law, S.B. 1070. Speaking at an elementary school in Silver Spring, Maryland, a second grader expressed her own concern for her



parents, telling First Lady Michelle Obama that, “My mom ... she says that Barack Obama is taking everybody away that doesn’t have papers. ... my mom doesn’t have any papers.”<sup>80</sup>

Even places such as public schools, which are supposed to be safe spaces and for which there is a constitutional right to education without regard for immigration status, are under attack. Anti-immigrant laws such as Alabama’s H.B. 56, which mandates that school officials report on the immigration status of their students and their students’ parents, are a concerted effort by restrictionists to go after unauthorized immigrant children. Not surprisingly, then, the day after H.B. 56 went into effect, 2,285 Latino students were absent from Alabama schools. Although the school-reporting provision of H.B. 56 is on hold pending legal challenges, it marks a new frontier for restrictionist action.<sup>81</sup>

### Parents try to shield children from the threats of deportation

Parents view as one of their primary roles to protect their children. The majority of the 91 parents interviewed felt compelled to shield their children from the threat of deportation. As a result, many avoided talking to their children about legal status. Some felt their children were too young to understand the nuances of immigration policy. One mother insisted that her two U.S.-born children do not know that she is undocumented:

*No, no, they don’t know ... but they do ask about it. My son asks me why I don’t have a license. And I tell him that I don’t have a social security number but, no ... I think about them, and I don’t want to tell them because it’s a lot, it’s long to explain, it’s too complicated.*<sup>82</sup>

Parents believed it was important to protect their children from adult worries. A mother of an 8-year-old explained, “No ... I have never talked to her about it. ... I have not put any of these ideas in my daughter’s head. I have never told her because her mind is, right now, with her childhood, with playing ... with her life as a girl.”<sup>83</sup>

But despite parents’ efforts to protect children from any fears related to legal status, interviews with children show that they are highly cognizant of the implications legal status has for their everyday lives. Children, regardless of their own legal status, fear the authorities and being separated from their parents.

## Undocumented children fear law enforcement

Undocumented children especially fear the police. The understanding that they need to be careful around the police appears to kick in early, even though parents prefer to shield their children from anxieties about immigration.

One 9-year-old recounted the story of crossing the border with his 7-year-old brother two years earlier, when they were 5 years old and 7 years old. “When we came here, the first time the police found us, the second time they sent us back to Mexico, the third they let us go, and the fourth time they let us go too.”<sup>84</sup> Neither brother distinguished between the police and immigration officials in the retelling.

In Ohio, they continued to view police as synonymous with trouble, as their mother explained:

*They know [about their legal status], and sometimes when I see a patrol car, I say “Police in sight,” and they know that they have to sit up straight ... then they see that it has gone by, and the danger is gone, then they relax.*<sup>85</sup>

Another mother explained that her 11-year-old daughter, who was 9 years old when she came to the United States from Mexico, “has a great fear of the police. She was afraid that they would send her back to Mexico.” She went on to say that at school:

*Her biggest worry is this [her legal status]. She used to evade people so they would not ask her questions because she was afraid that they would ask her for a social security number ... she started biting her nails out of worry.*<sup>86</sup>

How do young undocumented children learn to be afraid of the police? In a hostile environment, parents may try to protect their children by not talking about legal status. But they also need to communicate something about the threat of deportation to keep their children safe.

## Maria and Brandon: Young children fear law enforcement

Maria had met and married her Honduran husband in her hometown of Tamaulipas, Mexico. Unable to make a living there, the couple decided to come north in 2005, as members of Maria's family had already done. In Ohio both found work in factories; once their son, Brandon, was born, they alternated shifts—Maria at night and her husband in the morning—so that they would not have to leave their son alone. They could not afford child care. The day before the interview, Brandon had just turned 5 years old.

The author asked Brandon, who said his mother was Mexican and his father Honduran, if anyone in his family had been back to Honduras.

"My dad and my uncle ... they got them," he answered.

"Who got them?"

"The police." Brandon went on to explain, "Well, they were going to work, and they went down a street they didn't know. And there was a police there. My uncle was driving, but they took them."

The incident occurred six months earlier, when Brandon was only 4 years old. But he was not too young to understand the consequences. The incident clearly stuck out in his mind. Maria then explained how Brandon continued to be fearful of the police.<sup>87</sup>

One undocumented 10-year-old, for example, said he does not talk to his parents about his legal status, but then admitted that he is often worried about being sent back to Mexico. When the author asked him what his parents say to this, he answered, "They just say if we see a cop, don't tell them we were born in Mexico, or they will take us away."<sup>88</sup>

The relative silence between parents and children about illegality increases children's stress about the potential impact that legal status has on their lives.

In addition, studies show that the threat of deportation makes families and community members less trusting of police and other government officials, while researchers at the University of California, San Diego, found that immigrants in hyperactive enforcement jurisdictions such as North County, San Diego, were reluctant to contact the police to report crimes. When immigrants do not trust the police, they are less likely to report crimes or to cooperate, and it limits the ability of law enforcement to do their jobs keeping our communities safe.<sup>89</sup>

## U.S.-citizen children also fear being separated

It is not only undocumented children who fear for their families. U.S.-citizen children worry that their families will be ripped apart starting at very young ages.

The author asked a 6-year-old if she ever feels scared that her parents are immigrants. She said yes, “because if I am here, and my mom goes to Mexico, I am going to be sad because I would miss her.”<sup>90</sup> A 10-year-old U.S. citizen whose mother has severe kidney disease and receives dialysis biweekly thinks her family is going to have to go back to Mexico someday, “[be]cause the policiales [sic.] are looking for people that don’t have papers to be here.”<sup>91</sup> A 12-year-old boy is scared his parents are immigrants because “we might be apart.”<sup>92</sup>

Some of these children had a friend or extended family member detained by immigration officials. One mother, for example, said that after a close friend of the family was deported, she and her husband, both undocumented, got their three children—two U.S.-born citizens and one undocumented—passports. She was explicit in explaining to them that if something similar happened to them, they would all go back to Mexico together.<sup>93</sup>

Most of the children the author interviewed, however, did not have such explicit plans of action with their parents. None of the children interviewed, for example, carried around information with their vitals or contact phone numbers in the event their parents were detained, as has been occasionally reported in the news.

It is, in fact, the aura of ambiguity and insecurity that is especially scary for children. U.S.-born citizens and undocumented children alike experience the threat of deportation but feel powerless to do anything about it.

## The media’s influence

One contributing factor to children’s feelings of powerless is the news media. Children may not know anyone in their families or communities who has been detained or deported, but they hear about this potential outcome. Often this is because they have seen news coverage about the increase in enforcement tactics nationwide.

While research has shown that Spanish-language media tends to adopt a more positive perspective on immigration stories than English-language media, it has

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also shown that the Spanish-language news focuses far more on immigration than English-language outlets, leading to far more exposure about the prevalence of deportations across the nation.<sup>94</sup>

A 10-year-old, when asked if she had ever seen someone have their parents taken away, told the author, “Yes, I’ve seen it on TV.”<sup>95</sup> A 12-year-old girl said she is scared that the members of her family are immigrants “because when that happened on the news that a lot of people were getting caught, like, um, came on the door random and just took them. Yeah, I got really scared that time.”<sup>96</sup> When a 9-year-old was asked about what she thinks it is like to be an immigrant, she answered “sad.” When the author asked why, she responded:

*I saw a video of people, and they are immigrants, and one time they were going back to Mexico, and the policeman caught them, and they took them. And they had a daughter, and they left the daughter in the car.*<sup>97</sup>

U.S.-born children who have never had any interaction with Immigration and Customs Enforcement or with the police hear rumors about deportations on the news and feel afraid that this might affect their own families.

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## Misunderstandings about immigration

Children are not only afraid of family separation, but they also are confused about it. As is evident above, their accounts conflate immigration officials with police and vice versa. With more and more police districts collaborating with the Department of Homeland Security today, children are probably right. But the children interviewed did not live in districts with formal agreements between local law enforcement and the Department of Homeland Security, attesting to the trickle-down effects of policies on local communities nationwide.

Moreover, their misunderstandings go a step further: They not only conflate the police with the immigration, but they also begin to view immigration as equivalent to illegal.

## Equating immigration with illegality

Children in both Ohio and New Jersey equated immigration with illegality. The author asked children what they thought it was like to be an immigrant. A 12-year-old U.S.-citizen boy said, “They must be scared when they, if they catch them, then they have to go back to their country.”<sup>99</sup> Another, age 12, said “Scary, because you never know if they’ll want your passport. They catch you out of nowhere. They come and put you in a truck and send you back to Mexico.”<sup>100</sup> A 10-year-old said that while most in his family are immigrants, he thinks it would be “weird” to be an immigrant. “What’s weird about it?” the author asked him. “I think that, like, the people that are not from here, they are not supposed to be here” he answered.<sup>101</sup>

Interestingly, children responded this way even after given a definition for an immigrant as simply being someone who is born in one country and then moves to another country to live.

## Andrea: Children equate immigrant with undocumented

Ten-year-old Andrea was born in the United States in 2001. Her mother, Leticia, left the university in Mexico, where she was studying law, to join her boyfriend in New Jersey. Leticia got pregnant as soon as she arrived in New Jersey and had Andrea at the age of 21.

The relationship with Andrea’s father did not last; he became abusive and, with the help of her in-laws, Leticia decided to raise Andrea on her own. She worked two jobs, one in the morning and one after she picked up Andrea from school in the afternoon. Andrea spent most evenings with her cousins at her paternal aunt and uncle’s house.

Andrea’s father had returned to Mexico; she never saw him. She spoke both Spanish and English but had never herself been to Mexico. She knew a lot about Mexico, however, as her paternal grandmother visited her grandchildren every year on a tourist visa.

The author asked Andrea if she knew what an immigrant is.

“Yeah, it is when someone is illegal in this country, and police-ICE come to look for them to send them back to their country.”

Her eyes started to water when she then said her parents are immigrants. The author asked if she is proud that her parents are immigrants. She said “no.”

“Do you ever feel scared that they are immigrants?”

“Yeah,” she said, her chin quivering. “What scares you?” the author continued.

“When the police-ICE come, they will take them.”

Andrea confused being an immigrant with being undocumented. “What do you think it is like to be an immigrant?”

“I think it is hard because you have to try not to be caught by police-ICE, and you would like to stay in this country to have jobs and children to be legal in this country.”<sup>98</sup>

Even if young children do not fully understand immigration, they are aware at very young ages that there are social differences based on legal status even if this is difficult for them to articulate. Children, of all ages, have begun to associate immigration with illegality, regardless of their own family members' legal status and experiences with immigration. The conflation is potentially devastating for children's sense of self, as they grow up as children of immigrants in the United States.

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### The stigma of immigration

For young children, "immigrant" has almost become a dirty word, something they are ashamed of. Children, especially at young ages, frequently associated negative perceptions with immigration in interviews. In fact, only 25 of the 110 children interviewed across the sites said they were proud of their immigrant heritage. This compares to 77 children who said they were proud of their Mexican heritage.

Under the current enforcement regime, children are learning to associate a stigma with their immigrant heritage, hindering their social integration as they grow up in the United States.

### Ashamed

Young children believe that immigration has a negative connotation. In fact, many children preferred that others not know that either they or their parents are immigrants.

One 8-year-old girl said she needed to be careful about who she told. "Would you want your friends to know your mom is an immigrant?" the author asked. "Not every, every single friend, but some of them," she replied. "How come?" "They are mean because I was born in a different place from my mom."<sup>103</sup>

Older children agree. Twelve-year-old Osvelia—a U.S. citizen—wavered when asked if she wanted people to know about her parents' undocumented status. "I really don't—I want some people to know." "So which people would you feel okay knowing?" the author asked. "My friends that I feel like keep secrets well."<sup>104</sup> A 10-year-old boy said that only one person in his class knows that he is an immigrant. "What was his reaction?" I asked.

Under the current enforcement regime, children are learning to associate a stigma with their immigrant heritage, hindering their social integration as they grow up in the United States.

*“I told him, ‘Don’t tell anybody. It’s a secret. Not the teacher, not the principal. Or else I won’t be your friend anymore.’”*

*“What did he say?”*

*“I promise, I won’t tell anybody about it.”<sup>105</sup>*

Remarkably, even a 10-year-old boy whose mother is a U.S.-born citizen expressed reservations about others learning that some members of his family are immigrants. “If somebody finds out about that,” he explained, “they might make fun of me.”<sup>106</sup>

Children learn, in school, that this is a nation of immigrants. But under the threat of deportation, “immigration” and “undocumented” become synonymous, and children associate a stigma with immigration—turning it into a mark of shame rather than one of pride.

## Elizabeth and Kevin: Children internalize a stigma of immigrant status

Elizabeth’s husband came to the United States first, to live with Elizabeth’s sister, when his job as a taxi driver was not enough to support Elizabeth and the couple’s two young sons. Within months he felt defeated, ready to return to Mexico, depressed without his family and without any more money to support them.

At this point Elizabeth decided to join him in Ohio, where she could work alongside him and help him save money. She left her boys, toddlers at the time, with her mother in Mexico. But the child care strategy did not last: Elizabeth’s mother called, and said she could not look after the two boys, so Elizabeth and her husband sent for the boys.

Kevin, age 7, had lived in the United States for four years when the author first met him. He had only attended school in the United States. In an interview with the author, Kevin said he was born in

Mexico but did not know anyone in his family who is an immigrant. This was after the author gave him a definition of an immigrant as someone who is born in one country and then moves to another country to live. But when later asked point blank, “Are you an immigrant?” he admitted, “Yes.”

“Would you want your friends to know that you are an immigrant?” the author asked.

“No,” he answered.

“Why?”

“Because I would be ashamed.”<sup>102</sup>



# Conclusion and policy recommendations

Deportation policies are bad for children and their families. They may permanently restructure families, and they have severe repercussions for families' daily routines. Deportations also have financial and emotional consequences for all family members. They especially shape the experiences of women who become sudden single mothers when a father is deported. Specifically, they alter children's relationships with their fathers.<sup>107</sup>

Deportation policies are also especially harmful for children in the communities in which they live. Most children interviewed had never had a direct interaction with the Department of Homeland Security. But they described the fears of potential separation from their parents. They also expressed many misunderstandings about the roles of the police, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and immigration in general. Finally, children express a stigma attached to immigration, as they conflate "immigration" with "illegality." They dissociate from their immigration heritage.<sup>108</sup>

Certainly the deportation of people who have committed certain serious crimes and are threats to our national security will inevitably break up families. But there are ways to recognize the importance of family unification and to mitigate the devastating effects of deportation, especially for those who have committed no crimes, save for the civil penalty of being in the country without status.

To better support children and families, we make the following policy recommendations:

- **Enact commonsense and comprehensive policy change.** In the long term, only comprehensive immigration reform with a pathway to earned legalization for unauthorized immigrants can grant long-term security to parents in mixed-status families. Children need not be afraid that their family will be broken up due to irregular statuses. They must not learn to be ashamed of their immigrant heritage.

- **Modest legislative fixes can help, as well.** On July 16, Rep. Lucille Roybal-Allard (D-CA) introduced the Help Separated Families Act, H.R. 6128, to ensure that children are not taken away from their relatives simply because of their parents' immigration status. In July 2011 Sen. Al Franken (D-MN) and Rep. Lynn Woolsey (D-CA) introduced the Humane Enforcement and Legal Protections for Separated Children Act, which would mandate standards for immigration enforcement when children are involved. The bill would ensure that parents are kept informed and are able to continue to make decisions about the care of their children, and that the interests of the children are taken into account in detention, release, or transfers. Passing these bills would go a long way toward preventing children from ending up in foster care while their family members are detained or deported.<sup>109</sup>
- **Expand executive action.** In the short term, administrative action can greatly alleviate threats to immigrant families. President Obama can and should allow parents, especially those supporting U.S.-citizen children, to stay in the country if they have committed no crimes and are only guilty of being in the country without status.

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## About the author

**Joanna Dreby** is assistant professor of sociology at the University of Albany, State University of New York and received her doctorate from the City University of New York Graduate Center in 2007. She is the author of the book *Divided by Borders: Mexican Migrants and their Children*, as well as numerous other articles on families and immigration. Dreby is an ethnographer of family life, whose research focuses on the ways migratory patterns and families' decisions about work and child care affect children. Her current work explores how legal status affects families.

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- 29 The author conducted all the interviews in Spanish or English, as requested—generally in Spanish with parents and in English with children. Most interviews took place in families’ homes. Interviews with parents were semistructured, while interviews with children followed a structured format. The author adapted questions to the child’s age, posing more simple questions to younger children and using more in-depth questions with older children.
- 30 The author obtained approval from the institutional review boards at Kent State University and the State University of New York at Albany for all phases of this study. She also received a certificate of confidentiality from the National Institutes of Health to further protect the identities of the study participants. All names that appear in this report are pseudonyms.
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