

U.S. Immigration Policy and Immigrant Children's Well-being: The Impact of Policy Shifts

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America is built upon a history of immigration; yet current immigration policy and anti-immigrant sentiment negatively affect the vulnerable population of immigrant families and children. Immigrant children face many problems, including economic insecurity, barriers to education, poor health outcomes, the arrest and deportation of family members, discrimination, and trauma and harm to their communities. These areas of immigrant children's economic

and material well-being are examined in light of restrictive and punitive immigration policies at the federal and local level. Implications for social policy reform, such as decriminalization, are discussed.

Key words: *immigration policy, immigrants, children, families*

Engraved on the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty is a poem written in 1883 by Emma Lazarus, a descendent of American colonial settlers. The final sentence of the poem, often quoted over the more than hundred years since its creation, states:

Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!
(1888, p. 202).

These lines suggest that the United States is a refuge and haven for immigrant families and their children. In fact, the beginning of the poem captures the sentiment even more strongly. The poem holds the statue as a symbol of the "Mother of Exiles" and that "from her beacon-hand glows world-wide welcome." The message is unmistakable: all immigrants are welcome. However, the U.S. history of immigration policies and the current response to immigration are far different.

This paper examines the well-being of undocumented immigrant families and children, especially their economic and material welfare, in the light of recent public policy shifts. This paper primarily focuses upon the children of undocumented immigrants, the majority of whom are Latino, and especially of Mexican origin. For the purposes of this paper, the term "undocumented" is employed to refer to immigrants living in the U.S. without the status of citizenship or legal permanent residency. Conscious effort has been made to avoid the terms "illegal immigrant" or "alien" which reinforce a negative and criminalization frame.

Six areas of children's well-being are addressed, including economic insecurity, barriers to education, poor health outcomes, arrest and deportation of family members, discrimination, and trauma and harm to the community. Within the larger

context of shifting federal immigration policies, special attention is placed upon local and state polices in U.S. states along the Mexican border, as these laws may shed light on future policy reactions to increasing immigration pressures throughout the U.S.

Immigration and Economic Well-being

Migration is a major social force in the world, especially in the U.S. For most immigrants, economics is a major impetus to leave their countries of origin. Pursuit of greater financial opportunities for immigrant families and their children has driven waves of immigration. In search of potential economic rewards, immigrants in the U.S. face numerous challenges and risks. Undocumented immigrants and their children, those who lack legal status, are especially vulnerable. Recently, U.S. immigration policy has shifted, with often deleterious economic and social consequences for undocumented immigrant families and children.

Immigrant children are already disadvantaged by poverty. While 13.5% of the general population was in poverty in 2006, 24% of non-U.S. citizens were in poverty, and 27% of non-U.S. citizens who entered the country since 2006 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). While declines in real median income were felt for all families from 2007 to 2008, the decline for foreign-born households was 50% greater than for native-born households (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Smith, 2009). For children whose parents are undocumented, the economic situation is worse. A third of the children of undocumented immigrants live in poverty, and almost half lack any health insurance (Passel & Cohn, 2009). Immigrant children grow up in poorer homes. For example, median family income for foreign-born Mexican and Central American households was \$36,249 compared to the median for all households of \$48,201 in 2006. This difference in household income is even more significant because 43% of non-U.S. citizen households hold four or more people, compared to only 21% of native-born households (author calculations from U.S. Census Bureau 2008 data).

A recent report by the Southern Poverty Law Center (2009) described the findings from 500 interviews with low-income

Latinos living in the South. They found:

They [Latinos in the South] are routinely cheated out of their earnings and denied basic health and safety precautions. They are regularly subjected to racial profiling and harassment by law enforcement. They are victimized by criminals who know they are reluctant to report attacks. And they are frequently forced to prove themselves innocent of immigration violations, regardless of their legal status. (p. 4)

U.S. immigration policy has become more restrictive and punitive as government policies have expanded intervention at the federal and local levels. These changes have both contributed to a hostile anti-immigrant climate, and have placed undocumented immigrant children in an even more precarious economic situation.

Historical Context of Immigration Policy

Federal U.S. immigration violations fall under civil law, not criminal law, and have historically been enforced in this way. As such, people who overstay a visa or are in the United States without documentation are legally entitled to better living conditions than convicted prisoners or pre-trial detainees (American Civil Liberties Union, 2007). Civil law covers issues such as property rights, child custody, divorce, contracts and agreements, which are not considered crimes. Therefore, under law, undocumented people are to be tried for a breach of contract, and not for committing a crime.

However, recent changes have led to a criminalization of federal immigration policy enforcement. Recent federal and state responses to immigration have focused on the ways that undocumented people have managed to stay in this country, such as through the use of false social security numbers and identifications. This new emphasis has had the effect of criminalizing the undocumented population without actually changing any federal laws (Bacon, 2008). Instead of continuing to treat undocumented immigration as a civil matter, law enforcement agencies have begun to enforce criminal sanctions against undocumented immigrants. When undocumented

immigrants use false or borrowed Social Security numbers for employment purposes, they can now be charged with identity theft. This is a felony-level criminal violation, and represents a marked shift from the earlier era where violations of immigration policy were primarily enforced as improper documentation requiring a reprocessing of documentation and status. If a criminal offense can be demonstrated, an immigration detainee can be held in prison along with criminal convicts.

The criminalization of immigration has occurred within the context of the federal response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, which has also expanded the government's punitive stance toward undocumented immigrants. Accompanying this turn towards criminalizing undocumented immigrants in the U.S. at the federal level has been the harsh enforcement of criminal sanctions at the state level, particularly those states along the U.S.–Mexico border. Numerous border-state policies have sought to restrict education, public benefits, and social services to undocumented immigrants.

The current period of national anti-immigrant sentiment can be traced to two major pieces of national legislation in 1996—the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) and the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA). These acts nationalized limits on Social Security coverage and social services for both legal and undocumented immigrants (Massey, Durand & Malone, 2003). States were permitted to limit or exclude entirely legal immigrants from both federal and state programs. These policies codified the belief that immigrants should not be entitled to services because they had not been here long enough to have earned them, and that immigrants should contribute to society, not draw out social services and cash assistance. In recent years, attention has focused on the “danger” that is posed by the surge in immigrants who either overstay their visas or permits to visit, or sneak over the border. Although the initial impetus was in response to the entry of the terrorists who attacked the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, focus has shifted primarily to Latino undocumented immigrants. Enforcement of immigration laws was minimal prior to 2000. From 1996 to 2000, less than 12,000 people had been deported and barred from re-entry; in 2006

alone, more than 13,000 people were barred from re-entering the United States for ten years (González, 2008a). The difference is not in the actual laws on the books, which have not been changed, but in the enforcement of those laws.

Almost a million foreign nationals were apprehended by the Department of Homeland Security in 2007, of whom 89 percent were natives of Mexico. Even more were apprehended the previous year. Two-thirds of those apprehended are released or willingly return to their native country. However, about a third of those apprehended were detained, resulting in the placement of undocumented people in prisons and requiring legal authorities' attention. Detentions have grown dramatically, particularly in the border states of California, Arizona, and Texas. The Department of Homeland Security detainee population was 311,169 in 2007, an increase of 21 percent over the previous year (Office of Immigration Statistics, 2008).

Harm to Children from Immigration Policies and Enforcement Tactics

In general, children in immigrant families tend to experience greater economic, health and housing hardship (Child Trends, 2007). One in five children in the United States lives in an immigrant family: 80 percent of these children are born in this country and legally are entitled to the same support as all U.S. citizen children (Kids Count, 2007). Although entitled to resources, children in immigrant families are disproportionately poor, more likely to have parents without a high school diploma, and often live in linguistically isolated households. Most immigrant parents work, yet their positions are predominantly low-wage. Immigrant families with working parents are twice as likely as working native families to be low-income, experiencing higher rates of economic hardship and at the same time, lower rates of participation in public benefit programs. The negative outcomes of the challenges related to immigrant family status have been documented for years, yet recent public policies and actions have exacerbated these conditions for immigrant children and further compromised their health and well-being.

Economic insecurity

Most immigrants come to this country for economic opportunity. Regardless of their education and skill level, the demand for low-wage labor and lack of English language proficiency often forces many into work that is dirty, dangerous, difficult, and low-paying. This contributes to the perception that immigrants keep wages low. In most cases, however, such jobs are the only ones available, and because of necessity, immigrants who take those jobs are unable to demand higher wages. This pattern dates back to the immigrations of the 1800s. Over time, as ethnic groups became acclimated and new generations were born in this country, the economic status of earlier immigrant groups improved. This trend lends credence to the belief of new immigrants that the United States is the land of economic opportunity. In fact, research suggests that today immigrants assimilate faster into American culture than previous generations (Aizenman, 2008). However, this may be true mainly for those who can obtain legal status. Data on poverty reveal that poverty rates are lower among foreign-born people who become naturalized than among native-born people. For example, in 2005, the native-born poverty rate was 12.1%, the foreign-born naturalized citizen rate was 10.4%, and the foreign-born noncitizen rate was 20.4%. The economic advantage of nativity and citizenship can be seen in the disparity of these poverty rates. Among non-citizen immigrants, the poverty rate is more than twice that of the native-born population (Mishel, Bernstein & Allegretto, 2007). These researchers conclude that "naturalized citizens face certain economic advantages, such as in the job market, that give them a leg-up on noncitizens" (p. 292).

Economic insecurity affects immigrants in myriad ways. Unemployment and under-employment are primary sources of stress, as is the sheer fear of unemployment. The U.S. economic slowdown has had a disproportionate impact on foreign-born Latino workers. Negative changes in socio-economic status due to unemployment result in poor health outcomes (Lassetter & Callister, 2009). Undocumented workers have the additional stress of fear of being discovered, due to policies that force employers to establish the status of employees or risk sanctions, such as through the federal identity verification system known

as E-Verify. This fear exacerbates the poor health that economic stress already places on poor workers. The pressures of immigration, including the fear of employment loss, have been shown to impact the family structure of Mexican-American families. Parents have less time to spend with children, which in turn has been shown to result in increased loneliness, isolation, and risk-taking behavior among children (Bacallao & Smokowski, 2007). These pressures on family time and structure also result in lower levels of self-esteem for children (Love & Buriel, 2007).

Barriers to Education and Future Life Opportunities

Public education is a right for all children, including undocumented children. By law, undocumented children are eligible for free public elementary and secondary education, however continuing their education is problematic. Children who came to this country at a young age and may have excelled in school do not have the opportunity for higher education that similarly educated and accomplished children with citizenship have. Federal law prohibits the hiring of undocumented workers; this renders unauthorized students ineligible for federal financial aid in the form of work-study. Federal legislation also discourages states from extending educational benefits such as in-state tuition rates (Congressional Research Service, 2008). In some states, such as Arizona, laws have been passed to explicitly bar undocumented students from qualifying for in-state tuition, regardless of how long they have actually lived in the state. These students are caught in a serious bind—if they apply for citizenship in order to receive federal aid, they will expose their undocumented status and risk immediate deportation, regardless of how well acclimated or outstanding their academic achievement. The irony of this situation has been highlighted through several publicized cases. In one such case, a group of exceptional young students, known as the Wilson 4, were penalized for their lack of legal status.

In 2002, four high school students from Arizona were part of a team from their charter school who competed in an international solar-powered boat competition in Buffalo, New York. The four students were brought to the United States from Mexico by their undocumented parents when they were

toddlers. They were excellent students through high school. While on the school trip, their group visited Niagara Falls and planned to cross over to the Canadian side. U.S. immigration officials questioned them for nine hours over their immigration status (Meléndez, 2005). Their case was thrown out by a federal immigration judge for racial profiling, citing that they were targeted by border officials because they were Hispanic (González, 2005). Congressional attempts were made to grant them amnesty, but failed. Their case brought to light the problem with undocumented children who are brought over at a young age, participate fully in American life, even excel as students, but are limited in opportunities and at risk for deportation.

Today, years after the Wilson 4 case drew publicity to the plight of undocumented students, the problem persists. In spite of a state law that was passed in Arizona prohibiting undocumented students from qualifying for in-state tuition or state or federal grants, young people do attend university. Typical of these cases is Guillermo, 22 years old, who was brought to the U.S. from Mexico when he was 4 years old. Although graduating with a 3.44 GPA from university, he works using an invented Social Security number in a low level job. He cannot pursue employment commensurate with his educational degree without risk of being discovered to be here without documentation (González, 2009). He may be one of thousands or more educated yet undocumented youth who are prevented from realizing their full potential due to penalizing immigration policies.

Arrest, Detention and Deportation of Undocumented Workers

In recent years there has been a growing effort at worksite enforcement of immigration policies. This approach focuses less on the individual immigrant and more on the employers. Even though for 20 years it has been against the law for an employer to knowingly hire or continue to employ a person who is living without documentation in the United States, until recently little has been done to enforce the law. Now, the federal government and many state governments have increased scrutiny of employers.

In May of 2008, the federal government, under the Bush

administration, conducted the largest crackdown on undocumented workers. Three hundred eighty-nine immigrants were arrested at a meatpacking plant in Postville, Iowa. Authorities alleged that three fourths of the almost 1,000 employees had used false or suspect Social Security numbers (Hsu, 2008). On the day of the raid, 400 hundred people, mostly Mexican and Guatemalan women and children, fled to a nearby Catholic church in what was described by residents as a “disaster-relief response” (Rubiner, 2008). For this small community, the arrests incarcerated more than 10 percent of the town’s population.

Many of the arrested workers were the parents of young children, some of whom had been born in the U.S. and were therefore citizens. When undocumented parents are arrested and detained for deportation, their children are left behind because many have citizenship status. Workplace raids leave hundreds of children without one or both of their parents within minutes, as undocumented workers are immediately detained. With tightened enforcement, people are no longer released pending deportation hearings, rather they are being held in prison the whole time prior to the hearing, leaving no opportunity to see their families or prepare for deportation. Although enforcement of the law is intended to punish the employer of undocumented immigrants, the immediate impact is felt by immigrant families, while the employers continue to operate and either avoid prosecution due to lack of legal evidence or deal with the allegations through years of litigation.

Research on the impact of these workplace raids on immigrant families shows significant stress and trauma for the children. Following raids in three different communities, researchers found that fear, lack of access to telephones, and being detained left significant numbers of children in the care of others without information on the whereabouts or conditions of their parents. Once arrested, many undocumented workers were afraid to disclose they had children, for fear that the children would be taken from them. Once remaining family members were aware of the situation, many of them went into hiding, avoiding authorities as well as social service and community representatives (Capps, Castañeda, Chaudry & Santos, 2007).

Even for those who have lived and worked in this country for years, the increased enforcement and deportation spread to

other facets of life. For example, 38-year-old Ismael Valeriano had worked in the United States for almost 20 years and was raising his three sons who were all born in the United States. He was arrested when he went to claim his impounded car, which was being held for driving without a valid license and insurance. He was immediately arrested because he was undocumented and was held for several months until a community group could raise the bail. In the meantime, his three children, ages 12, 15, and 16, were at home taking care of themselves until their grandmother could travel from out of state to care for them (González, 2008a). It is estimated that there are five million children with at least one undocumented parent (Capps et al., 2007), many of whom are U.S. citizens. Should deportation actions continue, these children will either be left to grow up in the U.S. without their parents, or will have to relocate to countries where many have never lived.

Detention in immigration facilities and deportation to Mexico results in significant family disruption. The disruption of undocumented families, when parents are separated from their children, results in increased symptoms of mental health problems among children (Pottinger, 2005). This disruption is so traumatic that the fear of deportation itself results in emotional stress. Fear of arrest and trauma from the workplace raids themselves have profound impacts on children. After the Iowa raid, half of the school system's students were absent from school, including 90 percent of the Hispanic children, because their parents were arrested or in hiding (Hsu, 2008).

Recent changes in the enforcement of immigration policy have put immigrants at increased risk of adverse interactions with law enforcement. Many immigrants, based on negative experiences with corruption in their country of origin, have a pre-existing fear of law enforcement officers. This is only exacerbated as law enforcement has increasingly harassed the immigrant population through racial profiling and crime sweeps. Racial profiling, anti-immigration sentiment, and the increased militarization of the U.S.-Mexico border reinforce the racial hierarchy and further immigrants' experiences with discrimination (Romero, 2008).

This criminal justice response to immigration is unfortunate, as immigration to a particular city has not been shown to lead to an increase in crime rates, and in fact, some aspects of

immigration lessen crime (Reid, Weiss, Adelman, & Jaret, 2005; Sampson, Morenoff, & Raudenbush, 2005). When low-income immigrants migrate to urban centers, they often move into the cheapest housing and tend to live together in groups of families or small communities. This can lead to immigrants moving into blighted neighborhoods in the inner city, long since abandoned by the middle class. Immigrant communities, closely connected by language and culture, can re-animate such areas with renewed economic life and vibrancy. The strong social bonds between immigrants and the ensuing economic development can benefit inner-cities and serve to prevent further urban decline.

Poor Health Outcomes

In addition to economic stress, and as a consequence of lacking adequate employment and resources, children in immigrant families experience higher rates of poor health—more than twice the rate of native children (Capps & Fortuny, 2006). The stress upon immigrant parents can negatively affect their children's development, such as reduced cognitive functioning, and increased symptoms of depression (Ayón & Marcenko, 2008). Risks to healthy psychological and social development, reduced educational opportunities, and economic instability all threaten the future life outcomes of immigrant youth. Immigrants experience many fears and face many barriers to accessing health and social services (Hargrove, 2006). Cultural and language barriers represent significant obstacles blocking immigrants' access to health care services (Lassetter & Callister, 2009). In addition, immigrant families have less knowledge of systems of care and access to advocates, thus hindering their ability to access care or navigate systems (Ayón, 2009).

While immigrant families may be less inclined to use health care services, undocumented families are even more fearful of presenting themselves to authorities of any kind, including health care providers. Undocumented families report lower levels of access to services and resources that require identification, such as checking and saving accounts, credit, and driver's licenses. This deficiency in basic material supports and institutional resources has been associated with negative economic and psychological consequences for parents as

well as lower levels of cognitive development among infants (Yoshikawa, Godfrey & Rivera, 2008). In addition, undocumented immigrants are significantly less likely to report being victimized, indicating restricted access to the justice system. This is especially true for new generations of immigrant children (Peguero, 2008).

The increased punitive enforcement of immigration policy has also restricted immigrants' access to health care. In the summer of 2008, Chinese immigrant Hiu Lui Ng, died at age 34 while detained by immigration officials. He had terminal cancer, and was denied access to decent medical treatment. Ng, who came to the U.S. as a teenager, was employed as a computer engineer, but his visa had expired. This case is representative of the substandard health care services available to the thousands of people detained in immigration facilities (Bernstein, 2008).

The situation is especially dire for women. Researchers have documented that detainees in Arizona experience inadequate prenatal and mental health care. In one case, a woman six months pregnant was denied prenatal care during the month she was in immigration custody. In another, a woman was diagnosed with cervical cancer prior to being detained. During her detention, she was unable to access medical help for a month, and when she did, she was given aspirin. Only after a medical emergency was she finally able to see an oncologist (Southwest Institute for Research on Women, 2009).

Due to immigration reform, immigrant children are more likely to be uninsured (Pati & Danagoulian, 2008). As a result of the 1996 laws, even legal immigrants were barred from Medicaid and the State Children's Health Insurance Program for five years following their entry to the U.S. This policy codified the exclusion of medically needy immigrants who were authorized to live in the U.S. The result was neglected medical care, and a greater utilization of emergency health services. With the election of President Obama, this policy was changed. In February of 2009, Congress passed and the president signed into law a new children's health insurance bill that authorizes immediate coverage of legal immigrant children (Pear, 2009). This policy change will allow previously excluded children to receive medical coverage. While this does not apply to

undocumented children, it will provide needed health care for legal immigrant children, and may help to shift the anti-immigrant sentiment that contributes to discouraging immigrant families from accessing services even when they are entitled to those services.

Discrimination

As these changes in immigration policies have reinforced social prejudices, immigrants have been increasingly subjected to a climate of intolerance and hostility. Research has shown that immigrant children in the U.S. must struggle to cope with their experiences of racism, discrimination, and prejudice (Coll & Magnusson, 1997). Immigrant children who are exposed to discrimination suffer psychological consequences (Coll & Magnusson, 1997; Romero, Carvajal, Valle & Orduna, 2007; Slonim-Nevo, Mirsky, Rubinstein & Nauck, 2009). Experiences with racism leave immigrants particularly vulnerable to depression (Lassetter & Callister, 2009). This contributes to social marginalization, which can lead to damaging outcomes for immigrant adolescents (Mesch, Turjeman & Fishman, 2008). This is especially prevalent for Hispanic girls, who, due to stressors such as poverty, discrimination, immigration, and acculturation have been shown to experience lower levels of self esteem and to have disproportionately high school drop-out rates (Turner, Kaplan & Badger, 2006).

A climate of social intolerance is further reinforced by policies that enforce "English only" education. This may negatively impact immigrant children's educational performance. Research has shown that there is a significant educational outcome benefit for Hispanic immigrant children who retain strong Spanish language skills (Lutz & Crist, 2009). Second and third generation immigrant children are more likely to experience more negative mental health symptoms such as suicide attempts, substance abuse, and depression (Pena et al., 2008) which may be the cumulative result of having experienced more racism and discrimination. Referred to as the "healthy immigrant hypothesis," research has revealed that health and mental health outcomes for immigrants worsen across generations; the more time spent in the U.S., the more likely they are to experience problems. One explanation for such a

phenomenon is that increased time in American society leaves immigrants with a greater exposure to racism and discrimination, and makes them more susceptible to the stress that racism inflicts upon victims.

Trauma and Harm to the Community

Although the goal of tighter enforcement is to diminish the numbers of undocumented people entering and staying in the United States, the policies have an immediate negative impact on Latino communities. Latino immigrants are experiencing worse treatment by authorities and see their situation as deteriorating. From 2007 to 2008, pessimism among Latinos grew, with half of those surveyed by the Pew Hispanic Center saying that the situation of Latinos has worsened over the year. One out of ten native-born U.S. citizens and immigrants alike reported that police or other authorities had stopped them and asked about their immigration status over the past year (Lopez & Minushkin, 2008). Restrictions of policies and increased enforcement have contributed to worry about deportation, with almost 60% worried about deportation of themselves, a family member, or a close friend.

For example, following the implementation of the 2008 Employer Sanction law in Arizona, apartments were abandoned, as people broke their leases and disappeared. Restaurants that rely on immigrant laborers to fill many of their service positions are having trouble hiring staff. This hurts the local economic climate, as businesses are deterred from locating to a state that has such strict employer sanction laws (Hansen, 2008). Community social service providers noticed immediate declines in school attendance among children of immigrant families, most of whom were likely to be children related to undocumented adults. It is not clear whether the children and families leave for Mexico, or for other communities in the U.S. What is clear is that they hide in the shadows.

As further evidence of the underlying intent to intimidate undocumented workers, for almost two years following the implementation of the 2008 Employer Sanction law in Arizona, 26 business raids were conducted (Hensley & Kiefer, 2009a). The immediate result was the arrest of numerous undocumented workers. However, over the same two year period,

only one business was punished under the law, but that business had already folded and was no longer operating (Hensley & Kiefer, 2009b).

The fallout of heightened enforcement of immigration laws extends throughout the Latino community. On April 12, 2008, members of a Phoenix, Arizona church, *Iglesia Cristiana Agape*, were on a spiritual retreat to the mountains. When another camper complained about noise, the country sheriff's deputies arrived, questioned the church members about their immigration status, and called in immigration authorities. Nine church members were detained, and seven of them were later deported to Mexico (González, 2008b). Fear to even participate in community activities has spread, leaving undocumented people without social supports that previously had been available.

Border towns are especially hard hit by the increased enforcement. Law enforcement and criminal prosecutions cost border counties millions of dollars a year, draining resources that could be used for other community efforts. For the 24 counties in Arizona, California, New Mexico and Texas that border Mexico, costs related to illegal immigration enforcement have more than doubled from 1999 to 2006, totaling almost \$200 million (Salant & Weeks, 2008).

Conclusion and Policy Implications

Research has documented the stress on families and children that results from immigration. However, little research has documented how the economic distress of immigrant families has been exacerbated by recent policies and enforcement practices directed towards undocumented immigrants. The deleterious impact of these public efforts has been most profound on the welfare of immigrant children, many of whom may be U.S. citizens living with undocumented families. The impact of these enforcement policies has been to economically marginalize families, and to traumatize and discriminate against all immigrants, even those who legally live in this country. In addition, these policies negatively impact the larger social group, of which immigrants, and many descendants of immigrants, are members.

Immigration policy must be decriminalized. Immigration should return to being a civil matter instead of a criminal matter. Immigration policy should be made less restrictive, enabling the millions of undocumented people in the U.S. to emerge from the shadows of society. In order to further this aim and the public debate, the discourse on immigration must be shifted from a criminalization frame. This reinforces law enforcement solutions to this social and economic problem. To combat the criminalization frame, it is necessary to avoid the term "illegal immigrant," as we have done in this paper. We recommend adoption of the term "undocumented" in effort to shift the discourse away from criminalization.

To this end, policies that support the children of undocumented immigrants should be supported. One such example is the DREAM Act (Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors Act), introduced to several Congresses to allow undocumented students to be eligible for legal permanent resident status. There have been numerous variations of the DREAM Act, but the key provisions of the proposed bills include ways for young people who have been living in this country for at least five years, came here at an age younger than 16, have graduated high school, and have been admitted to college to have their immigration status adjusted to legal permanent resident status. Such legislation has been introduced and debated in the U.S. Congress, but voted down. Other legislation aimed at reforming immigration, including guest worker programs, amnesty, and pathways to citizenship, have all stumbled as the problem continues to grow.

The immigration debate is multi-faceted and complicated by social, economic, and political factors. But one thing stands out—the well-being of children is being compromised by these policies. In order to remedy this situation, there must be more just and humane policies that affirm the human dignity and promote the health and well-being of all people.

The contradiction between the promise of economic opportunity and the history of successive generations of immigrants on one hand, and the isolationist, xenophobic, punitive, anti-immigrant sentiment on the other is a conflict over the basic values and ideals of America. Those who would deem all immigrant criminals by virtue of their lack of documentation

ignore history and deny the severe limitations of current immigration policy. The United States is a nation of immigrants, with the vast majority of U.S. citizens tracing their roots of origin to other foreign countries. The current immigration system is broken at best, and malicious and racist at worst—punishing the poorest people for seeking a better life for themselves and their children. This is wrong and unjust. It violates not only professional values of social justice, but also American values of openness, independence, fairness, and opportunity, as well as universal human values of decency, dignity, and respect for life.

The law and order, anti-immigrant argument prescribes punishment of immigrants and their children to promote deterrence. But deterrence has not worked, especially not in the case of immigration; people migrate anyway. The factors that propel immigration outweigh the punishment, and many, once punished and deported, return. Decriminalization of immigration policy would certainly help. However, if immigration returned to being a civil rather than criminal violation, this may not influence anti-immigration advocates. For some, illegal means illegal. This illustrates the difficulty of debating immigration reform, where proposals lessening restrictions are labeled as weak and soft, and are derided for extending amnesty to criminals.

In the name of border security we are doing unspeakable damage to children. This corrupts America's promise and its future. No economic gains can justify betraying cherished ideals and distorting our dignity. No amount of comfort, ignorance, or false security can justify this. Through punitive and restrictive policies we are not protecting American economy, culture, and institutions. Instead we are damaging and threatening our future by risking and imperiling the dreams of the youth. We ought to invest in our future by investing in the health, education, and welfare of vulnerable immigrant families and children.

Social service professionals can and should play a vital role in this investment, and in protecting the rights and welfare of immigrants. This might not sway the debate, but it might help to inch the debate towards a more inclusive, human reform. Our goal should be to expose the human costs of anti-immigration sentiment and restrictive immigration policies, particularly on behalf of children.

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