

Think of Undocumented Immigrants as Parents, Not Problems

By ROBERTO SURO and MARCELO M. SUÁREZ-OROZCO on April 27, 2015 in the *New York Times*

LOS ANGELES — SOMETHING happened while the immigration system in the United States got broken, something that should change the way we talk about fixing it. Years went by, and nature took its course. More than 11 million unauthorized immigrants settled into our communities; many formed families and had children. Now at least one of every 15 children living in the United States has an unauthorized parent, and nearly all of those children are native-born United States citizens.

Think of that statistic, one in 15, the next time you drive by a school or a playground. Think of those children living with the knowledge that the federal government can take their parents away. Common sense tells you that the threat of a parent's deportation will exact a terrible price.

Now it's possible to get some measure of how big the cost is. In a recent report, we assessed more than 50 research studies of the children of unauthorized immigrants conducted by scholars in a variety of fields. This growing body of work shows that fear and uncertainty breed difficulties that manifest themselves in delayed cognitive development, lower educational performance and clinical levels of anxiety.

By one estimate, more than six million children are paying the price of having an unauthorized immigrant parent, and more than five million of them were born here. A study that followed 380 New York City newborns for three years found evidence of lower cognitive skills as early as 24 months among the children of the undocumented and concluded that parents' psychological distress played a major role. A 2004-8 Los Angeles survey of more than 5,000 immigrants found that having an unauthorized immigrant mother means children will end their education with one and a half years less schooling than those growing up under identical circumstances, with a mother who is in the country legally.

The research not only diagnoses the costs of policy failure but also points the way to a solution. The same Los Angeles study found that 43 percent of children with a father legalized in the 1986 immigration reform act received some college education, compared with 14 percent of similar children whose father remained an unauthorized immigrant. Legalization can place these young people on a life trajectory equal to that of their peers.

Once you take this evidence into consideration, the challenges change. The nation has an interest in regulating immigration, yet it also has a stake in its children. Current policies do not succeed in regulating immigration, but they do force these children into life-stifling insecurity.

Though now blocked by a legal challenge, the executive actions issued by President Obama in November offered an immediate if short-term fix. One of the proposed programs would grant permission to parents of American citizens and legal residents to remain in the United States for three years and to work legally, as long as they meet a number of conditions. An amicus brief signed by an array of educational organizations and children's advocacy groups cited our report as evidence of the harm current policies inflict on children who are United States citizens, and the federal government made the same argument during an appellate court hearing this month.

These young citizens are at risk of being less than full members of society. Removing the threat of deportation from their families gives them a chance to prosper. That serves the public interest more effectively than maintaining an enforcement system widely decried as ineffective and unjust.

In the universe of manufactured disadvantage, we cannot think of many instances in which sitting judges, with the stroke of a pen, can bring immediate and measurable relief to millions of children. Here, they can. The remedy begins by understanding that the adults can no longer be seen simply as people who slipped the border to find work. We must begin to see them as parents, as the people raising our nation's children. Some will reject that view and fault the adults for being in this country without proper immigration status.

But the American sense of fairness and system of justice have long embraced the notion that the "sins of the father" should not be visited on the children. Reasonable minds can debate whether there is blame to attach to the parents. There is no reasonable case to be made for punishing their children, who are citizens of the United States. Yet they are punished every day.

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