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JULY 30, 2008

Split Decision

Children of undocumented immigrants find themselves in the cracks of international

BY [DEANNA DARR](#)

Mention the word "immigration" and you feel a tremor as the ideological split creates a chasm, widened by raw emotions—love, fear, anger and hope.

But there are those who end up at the bottom of that chasm through no fault of their own. They are children, United States citizens, who live with the very real possibility of being separated from their parents who are here illegally.

They're children like Gina, 13, Eric, 10 and Nyellie, 5, who have lived with their paternal grandparents since their fathers were deported to Mexico.

Sister and brother Gina and Eric, and their young cousin Nyellie all share a streak of shyness, but after awhile, their broad, open grins hint at their true nature. The young trio lives in their grandparents' Caldwell home. They attend local schools and churches, but unlike most of their classmates, they have to drive 20 hours to see their fathers.

It's a trip their grandmother, Maria Alvarez, tries to make every few months, driving from the Treasure Valley to the Mexican border town of Nogales over a weekend. They leave after Alvarez gets off work on Friday evening, traveling through the night to let the kids spend part of Saturday and Sunday with their fathers before heading back home for work and school on Monday.

It's a ritual they've followed for nearly four years, since the first of Alvarez's sons was deported after being arrested by Caldwell police for other offenses.

Alvarez simply states that her sons, whom she prefers not to name, made some mistakes. They came to the United States as children, spending the majority of their lives here, but the fact

Starr Shepherd

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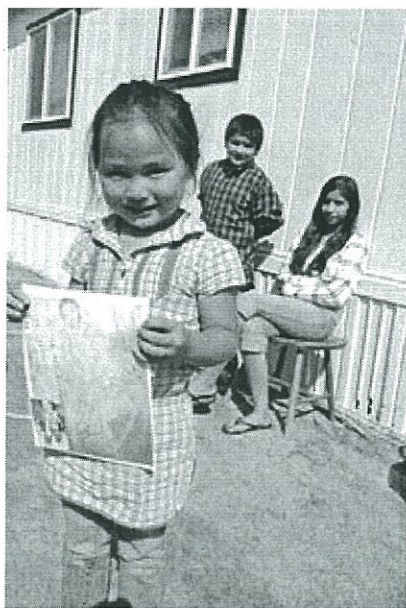
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Nyellie, 5, and her cousins, Eric, 10, and Gina, 13, are part of a growing number of children whose families are split. She holds a picture her father drew of his hands reaching for her, but stopped by the border.

Joyce Alexander

of undocumented workers were taken into custody in one fell swoop. In these cases, action was taken so children were left at school or with caretakers, with no knowledge of what had happened to their parents. cities had to scramble to make arrangements until a parent was released from custody to care for their ch awaited deportation hearings.

In the Treasure Valley, large-scale workplace raids haven't been common, but families have been separated down on those who have been previously deported and anyone with a criminal record.

Once in federal custody, an undocumented immigrant may be eligible for a humanitarian release if he or s caregiver and does not have a prior criminal record. Even under release, these parents still await deportat cannot work unless they have a valid work permit. They're also required to regularly check in with case w

Those who aren't released can designate a legal family member or friend to take care of a child while the detention. But if there is no one to take that child, ICE is forced to go to the local child protective services

"It's our last choice," said ICE spokesperson Lorie Dankers.

If deported, parents face a decision few can imagine having to make: whether to take a child back to their leave them in the United States, where the quality of life is often far better than in the country they left b

"For a lot of parents in general, they would love to see their children be able to be raised in the United Sta decisions that the family makes," Dankers said.

It was a difficult decision for Alvarez and her family. Her grandchildren had already been living with her of were young, spending part of their time with their mothers. But after their fathers were both deported, Al they needed to stay in the United States.

"[It's] better for the kids here," she said, adding that most parents want their children to be able to speak

"Over there, if you don't have money, you don't have work, you don't eat. Over here, you don't have wor church, you can go to other places to help you," Alvarez said.

remains they were undocumented immigrants.

Alvarez and the rest of her family, including her four other children, all have legal resident status, and her grandchildren were born in the country.

But because their fathers were in the country illegally, Gina, Eric and Nyellie are part of a growing number of child with the repercussions of stricter enforcement of immigration laws.

As the issue comes to a head, social service workers, government o community leaders are scrambling to find a way to address the mo and financial tallies.

Crackdown

According to a study released last year by the National Council of L Hispanic civil rights and advocacy group in the United States—and t roughly 5 million children in this country have at least one undocurr

Coupled with increased enforcement by U.S. Immigration and Custc division of the Department of Homeland Security, communities acro seeing an increase in the number of children stuck in a legal limbo; citizens, their parents are not.

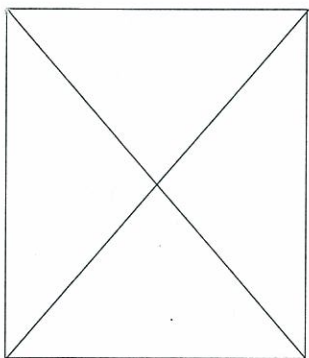
Many of the communities hit hardest are those targeted by ICE for l raids like Greeley, Colo.; Grand Island, Neb.; and New Bedford, Ma

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She was scared for her sons to go to Mexico, a country they had left when the family crossed the border if they had been a successful family band, Grupo Marin, but they left it behind for a chance at stardom in th

Alvarez said they were promised they were coming into the country legally, but were lied to and ended up. They had to start over, moving from California to Utah and eventually to Idaho.

When her sons were deported, they decided not to return to Alvarez's home in Nayarit, near Puerto Vallar extended family still lives. Instead, they rented a house in Nogales so they could still have brief visits with

But there are dangers there for those raised in the United States. Alvarez said people have been attacked speaking English rather than Spanish.

Heading Abroad

Those who choose to bring their children with them to their home countries face additional legal hurdles to a U.S. citizen into a foreign country.

Dankers said ICE works with each country to fulfill the legal requirements to allow a child to immigrate with. Even if they leave the country, the children maintain their U.S. citizenship and can return to the United States.

Even with the appropriate travel documents in place, it is often left to the federal government to pick up the children and family to the parents' country of origin. While adults are routinely flown on regularly scheduled flights, Dankers said families are usually taken via commercial flight to lessen the impact on children.

But even under the care of their parents, some in the social service community worry that bigger problems are ahead.

"What we're going to see happen, as the years of this play out and as children get older, is that a lot of families will take their U.S. citizen kids with them when they get deported," said Starr Shepard, immigration caseworker with Charities of Idaho.

"We're going to have a lot of kids moving to Latin America or whatever country it is, growing up in that country becoming accustomed to the laws and everything that we have here ... not really being acculturated to their U.S. citizens."

Leo Morales, community organizer for the Idaho Community Action Network, worries that this could in effect create second-class citizens.

But for some parents, the advantages offered in the United States outweigh their desire to be with their children.

"Some parents are deciding to leave their kids here because conditions are so bad in their home country, so they want to bring their kids there. They want their kids to be left here, even if it's in the foster care system," Shepard said.

"They think that if [children] stay in this country, they're going to have a better future," Morales said. "It's a tough choice."

When only one parent is deported, Shepard said children are being doubly traumatized.

"A family becomes a single-parent family like that," she said. "They lose that income and it's really bad."

Morales wonders about the psychological effects on children who are separated from one or more parents, only to have them return home they've known.

"We can talk about economics, but the trauma is key," he said. "That in itself should be a huge issue."

Both Morales and Shepard worry that it could cause a growing hatred of their home country.

"We've got all these traumatized U.S. citizen children that are either growing up without their parents, or another country with their parents," Shepard said. "It's not unlikely to think that there's going to be a majorly resent the United States government who are U.S. citizens."

Dr. William Hazle, medical director of both the Boise-based Business Psychology Associations and of Behavior at Portland Medical Services in Oregon, said the fears are real.

"In general, for a child, this is the worst thing that could happen," he said. "They look to the parents to bring sameness and predictability. Whenever you have a disruption—divorce, death, deportation—[you have] a lot of problems."

Hazle said children often feel they are responsible for what happens to those around them, and those feelings follow someone into adulthood.

Kids may not only fear a loss of security, but fear that same loss will happen again.

"You can't just reassure a kid," he said.

In the System

With increased enforcement, Shepard and others think there is the potential for many more kids to end up in the stressed foster care system.

Those who administer the state's foster care program are seeing a number of children enter the system because of ICE raids, but that's just a small part of the overall growth in the need for services.

Jeremy Player is the regional manager for family and community services in Region Three of the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare, which covers Canyon, Owyhee, Gem, Payette, Washington and Adams counties. He said that children in foster care because their parents had been deported, according to the region's last report.

Overall, Player said there can be upward of 500 children in the foster care program in his region alone, at a roughly 6 percent growth rate, although some areas—especially Canyon County—are up as much as 20 percent.

All of this is handled by a staff of 74.

Recently, the regional office ran a campaign to recruit bilingual foster families. Player said the campaign was hampered by ICE raids, but simply because 20 percent of the population he deals with is Hispanic.

"We want kids to be culturally comfortable," said Ross Mason, Region Three director for the Department of Health and Welfare. "It's easier for them, and they're [already] having a pretty tough time, whatever the situation may be."

The department has also made an effort to hire bilingual staff.

Player said the goal in every case his office deals with is to reunify a family—that just takes a lot longer when the family is in another country. While the actual number of children in the foster care system due to deportations is a small percentage of cases, those few instances take a lot of time and resources to reunite the families.

His office has worked on numerous cases trying to get children into their parents' home country. They work with consulates to make it happen, but it's no easy task dealing with the legal red tape. Sometimes, just making arrangements in small villages can take days of work, putting a drain on resources.

While foreign consulates will help bring one of their citizens back to their country, it's usually up to the United States to bring U.S. citizen children to their final destination.

Larger cities are dealing with the issue so often that many have developed procedures for just such cases. Boise has had that need yet, Mason said Health and Welfare is looking at what other communities are doing.

Just the Beginning