

Deportations create dilemma for families with young U.S. citizens

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It's at bedtime that Jorge Barraza misses his father most. The 5-year-old, clutching two stuffed animals, is dressed in pajamas and a felt cowboy hat just like his dad's. But such comforts don't make up for the absence of Juan Carlos Barraza, a Mexican migrant repatriated to his old hometown.

"He's really in Mexico. By himself," Jorge says in English. "We went to visit him, and the first night I wanted to get home."

Jorge, who lives in Mesquite with his mother, is one of nearly 3.5 million children in the U.S. caught in the middle of the national debate about illegal immigration – born in this country to a parent who is an illegal immigrant.

Amid the biggest wave of repatriations and deportations in decades, these children are being pulled in two directions – a situation that the U.S. government blames on the parents.

"The responsibility of these decisions rests with the parents, not with ICE," says Carl Rusnok of U.S. Immigration & Customs Enforcement.

Some, like Jorge, stay in the U.S. without one of their parents.

Others, like 8-year-old Leslee Acuitlapa, are asked to start new lives in countries that are foreign to them.

For almost a year, Leslee and her family have lived in Malinalco, a town of about 8,000 about 80 miles south of Mexico City. Its fresco-filled convent and Aztec temple draw weekend tourists, as does the nearby golf course. But there's also considerable poverty, and the Acuitlapas are living in it.

As a construction worker, José Acuitlapa makes a fraction of what he did as a golf course groundskeeper in Georgia, where the family had a three-bedroom house. Here, everyone sleeps in one room, and the three children haven't had an easy adjustment.

Leslee once drew pictures of an airplane and a sun with beams of tears.



Moving to Mexico keeps family together

Margaret Parsons Acuitlapa moved her three kids from Georgia to a small town in Mexico, after her husband was rejected for a green card. He was also barred from entering the U.S. for 10 years because he had previously entered illegally. Now, they're struggling to adapt to a downsized lifestyle. (DMN Video/editing: Laurence Iliff)

"I had to leave," her caption read. Her 3-year-old sister, Sarah, clings constantly to their mother; 13-year-old brother Justin finds school easy. Among his classes is English as a second language.

Their U.S. citizen mother, Marty Parsons Acuitlapa, says simply, "They miss Georgia."

History-making

Jeffrey S. Passel, a senior demographer at the Pew Hispanic Center in Washington, says the magnitude of the immigration issues facing the U.S. is unprecedented.

"For the first 100 years of U.S. history, there was no such thing as an illegal immigrant," Mr. Passel says. "And for the next 50 years, if you showed up, they let you in. We didn't have a significant illegal immigrant population living here until the 1970s."

The number of undocumented immigrants is estimated to be about 12 million – the most in U.S. history.

Under the 14th Amendment, children born in this country generally are citizens by right, regardless of the immigration status of their parents.

Some would like to see birthright citizenship ended and argue that the 14th Amendment has been legally misinterpreted.

Others want legislation passed that would limit automatic citizenship at birth to children born in the U.S. who have a parent who is a U.S. citizen or lawful permanent resident. Rep. Nathan Deal of Georgia has sponsored such legislation – his latest attempt in early August – but the measure hasn't gone far.

And there seems little chance that the Constitution will be amended further.

For those who stay in the U.S., life can be harsh. Raids by immigration authorities, house arrests and greater scrutiny by local police have led to a record number of interior removals by federal authorities.

A study last year by the Urban Institute, a Washington-based think tank, found that children whose parents were caught in raids suffered from feelings of abandonment, of being outcasts.

And a report in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* last month said that the jump in immigration enforcement placed children at a heightened risk for depression and anxiety disorders.

Blaming the parents

The federal agency that enforces immigration laws says the parents are to blame if these children suffer.

"This comes down to the children or family being impacted negatively by the decisions of their parents," says Carl Rusnok of U.S. Immigration & Customs Enforcement.

Others say that the children shouldn't get a free pass to live in the U.S. just because of their parents' decision to come here.

Cathie Adams, president of the Texas Eagle Forum and a recent delegate to the Republican Party convention, said parents "have prepared the way for a difficult future by breaking the law."

"But I would encourage them to stay with the children," she said. "If they came here illegally, I would encourage them to go home and come in the right way."

The solution is simple, says Joe Kennard, a real estate developer who lives part time in Waxahachie. He started HelpCitizenChildren.org so church groups could sponsor a U.S. citizen-child with financial help to cover rent, schooling and other expenses. He says parents of these children should not be sent away.

"These are fellow citizens left in limbo," Mr. Kennard says of the children. "The radicals say that they deserve what they get. I say: Why?"

Last year on Sept. 9, Ms. Parsons Acuitlapa went to the U.S. consulate in Ciudad Juárez with her husband, hoping his green card would finally be approved based on her status as a U.S. citizen.

Instead, he was barred by U.S. consular officials from re-entry into the U.S. for 10 years because he had entered the country illegally.

Ms. Parsons Acuitlapa decided the family couldn't live apart. A month later, she and the children reunited with her husband.

"Some say we would have been better off not to have applied for papers," she says.

And she emphasizes that she and her children didn't "come back" to Mexico.

"We were forced to come to a place we didn't know," she said. "I hope that the laws change in the U.S."

Mesquite is home

Jorge's mother, Yvette Medrano-Barraza, 27, chose to stay in the U.S. to keep her son in Mesquite schools.

She had visited her husband's hometown of Recodo after he was barred in March from re-entry to the U.S. But the schools there were substandard, she decided, and far too many people in the Mexican state of Sinaloa were involved in the drug trade.

"My husband made the choice to come here illegally," says Ms. Medrano-Barraza, a U.S. citizen. "I made the choice of marrying him, knowing he was here illegally. My son didn't make a choice to have a dad who was here illegally."

These days in Mesquite, Jorge tells his mother, "I am angry with my dad because he left us."

Ms. Medrano-Barraza has abandoned the \$70,000 house she bought. She lives with an aunt to save on utilities. And she's done a voluntary repossession on her small sport utility vehicle. She sends her husband \$200 a month, sometimes half that. She's taking medication to fight depression and insomnia.

In Recodo, Mr. Barraza makes \$25 a week – a fraction of the \$600 he sometimes earned as a Texas chimney cleaner.

Each night, he waits for his wife's call, Mr. Barraza says in a phone interview. And when he talks to his son and Jorge asks when he'll return, he says only "pronto." Never anything more. "I can't say more."

Staff writer Laurence Iliff contributed to this report.