

Migrant Narrative

UC Davis Global Migration Center

Difficulties Faced by Children of Deported Parents

By Chandler Thompson

Problem

While the effects of deportation on adults have been well documented, the effects of the deportation of parents on the lives of their children have not received the same attention. That doesn't mean that children are any less traumatized by deportation events. From the moment of their parents' detention, the uncertainty surrounding the deportation process can cause acute psychological distress in children, and if deportation does take place, children may be separated from their parents for years, perhaps indefinitely. The absence of a parent can require that children take on extra responsibilities, and even in cases where children remain with their parents, the resulting hardships can have lasting effects on a child's mental, emotional, and physical wellbeing.

Observations

The following digital stories illustrate just how traumatizing the deportation of a parent can be in the life of a child:

Young **Zuri Ortega's** life changed forever when, on an April morning in 2016, her father Fernando was arrested by ICE agents in their California home and taken to a detention center to await deportation. The experience of seeing their father handcuffed before their eyes proved to be a traumatic one for Zuri and her siblings, one that her mother Rosa knows they will not soon forget. Said Rosa, "How do you explain to little children: 'What is happening?' 'Why are they taking their daddy?' [...] 'When will daddy come back home?' This marked my children's lives". While the children were able to see their father in monthly visits during his internment in the Adelanto Detention Center, his absence in their daily lives quickly took its toll. According to Rosa, the children's schoolwork suffered as concern for their father grew and the family's situation became more and more precarious.

When Fernando was eventually deported back to Peru, a country he had not lived in since coming to the United States as a young child, Zuri, as the eldest sibling, felt obliged to fill his role as parent for her brothers and sisters and help provide for the family's financial needs. In their family's narrative "[Steppin' In](#)," Zuri expresses sadness as she thinks about her father's absence and her lost childhood: "There is now just the responsibility that as the oldest, you have to now play a role in their childhood". With her father gone, it was Zuri who took her little sister to her first

day of kindergarten and purchased gifts for Christmas morning. While this situation was less than ideal for a young adolescent, Zuri was willing to do whatever it took to keep her family together and give her siblings the things she had to go without. "You forcefully have to [...] grow up and deal with more than what you are supposed to [...] filling in that role as a parent but still being a child at the same time."

While family separation is a common consequence of deportation, it is not always the case. When **Rachelle Carrillo's** father was deported in 2003, for example, her mother, a US citizen, decided to leave her family in Los Angeles and move with her children to Mexicali, Mexico, to be with her husband. But just because the family was together didn't mean that the Carrillo children weren't profoundly affected by the



Fernando with one of his children

experience. Rachelle explains in her narrative “[Daughter of Deportee: Deportation’s Collateral Damage](#)” that, although she was only three years old at the time, the sudden move was traumatizing. Due to the crippling separation anxiety stemming from her father’s long detention, Rachelle “became a selective mute,” not regaining normal speech until after kindergarten.

Once in Mexicali, Rachelle’s father found it difficult to get enough work to provide for his family due to suppressed wages in Mexico. To make ends meet Rachelle’s mother worked as an elementary school teacher in nearby Calexico, California, just on the other side of the border. But she was not the only one to make the daily pilgrimage to the United States. She was also joined by her three US born children who attended California schools. Rachelle explains that she and her siblings would wake up every morning at 5:30 a.m. so that they could be in line at the border in time to make it to school by 8:00 a.m. While it was difficult for her to get up that early, Rachelle recognizes that she was one of the lucky ones. Some of her friends who didn’t have SENTRI fast-passes had to be up by 4:00 a.m. to get to school on time.

As the children got older and became involved in extracurricular activities in school, Rachelle’s mother purchased a home in Calexico so that they could stay overnight on the US side when needed. While Rachelle enjoyed these opportunities to express herself through sports and dance, it was difficult knowing that her father, who was always supportive and involved in practices at home, would never be able to attend the events for which he helped her train. This absence led some of her classmates to refer to her father as “if he were sick or as if he had died”, something that Rachelle found profoundly troubling considering he was only a few miles away.

Another young woman, **Joseling Romero**, in her video titled “[My Deportation Story](#),” recalls ICE arriving early



The Carrillo family (Rachelle in the middle)

in the morning at her family’s home as family members were preparing for work and school. They served a warrant to detain her mother, who tried unsuccessfully to escape through a window. The trauma of seeing a parent “treated like a criminal” was hard to overcome.

Young people are often resilient and find success in the long run – for example, Rachelle Carrillo graduated from UC Davis with a double major in Plant Sciences and Spanish. However, as these stories show, deportation’s effects extend beyond the life of the person being deported. The collateral damage caused by family separation or relocation can have lasting consequences, especially in the lives of young children.

About Our Center

The UC Davis Global Migration Center studies immigration with a multi-disciplinary approach to better understand the immigration and integration of vulnerable migrants, including undocumented immigrants, temporary migrants and more.

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