

Children, Families & U.S. Immigration Enforcement

The Hidden Cost of Immigration Enforcement on Children

By Adriana P. Ramírez · Ph.D. Candidate, UC Berkeley Sociology · March 2026

4.6 million

U.S.-born children under 18 with undocumented parent

98

interviews with young return migrants in Mexico

35%

participants reported mental health challenges

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Family separation through U.S. immigration enforcement is not new, but under the current administration, it has become more systematic and far-reaching than at any prior point in recent history. At the center of this crisis are children, affected in two interconnected ways: some remain in the U.S. after a parent is deported; others follow their deported parents to Mexico, experiencing a forced uprooting from the only country they have ever known. Both inflict lasting harm.

The scale is vast. Between 2015 and 2020, 52.8% of people estimated to have returned to Mexico through *de facto* deportation were children of a deported parent (Hamilton et al. 2025). The Brookings Institution estimated approximately 310,000 formal deportations in 2025 (Edelberg et al. 2026), and if 47% of deported parents had at least one U.S.-born child, as 2015 data suggests, the number of children uprooted is substantial, excluding children of parents who self-deported. The broader population at risk is significant: in 2023, an estimated 4.6 million U.S.-citizen children lived with at least one undocumented parent (Passel & Krogstad 2025). This excludes undocumented 1.5-generation children — those born in Mexico but brought to the U.S. at a young age — for whom *de facto* deportation is effectively irreversible; they face almost no legal pathway back.

The harm is severe and lasting. Drawing on qualitative research with 98 young return migrants in Mexico, this brief documents three key moments in which enforcement shapes children's well-being: the sudden rupture of *de facto* deportation itself; the prolonged fear, before and after that rupture, that a family member could be taken at any moment; and the painful work of rebuilding a life in Mexico, severed from friends, schools, and belonging. Approximately 43% of participants reported some form of isolation; around 35% reported depression and/or anxiety; two disclosed self-harm upon arriving in Mexico. These are not adjustment difficulties — they are documented outcomes of state-sanctioned family separation.

This brief calls on Congress to take two actions: (1) Restructure immigration enforcement around family preservation; and (2) Create a Right of Return and Resettlement Support for *De Facto* Deported Youth and Young Adults.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

De Facto Deportation: Children Forced Out by Proxy

Among the young adults interviewed, fifteen experienced *de facto* deportation: their fathers were deported by ICE, and their mothers

faced an impossible choice — remain without their spouse, or uproot their children and follow. In every case, children had no say. They were collateral to a system that treats families as enforcement targets.

These children carry the psychological scars of learning of their parent's arrest — often secondhand, in fragments, hours after it happened. They remember the exact date, where they were standing, the silence before a phone call confirmed what they feared. Then came a second rupture: the quiet announcement, in a kitchen or living room, that they were leaving too. For children already reeling from their father's disappearance, this did not feel like reunion. It felt like a second deportation — one with no legal name, and no one to hold accountable for what it took.

For Leo, uprooted from Southern California at age twelve, the grief was total. That present tense — it's hard to accept — reveals that *de facto* deportation is not a single crisis but an ongoing process of adjustment. To accept an outcome you never chose, and that was never acknowledged as harm, is not resolution. It is something you carry.

"After that day, I didn't feel happy... It felt like a huge letdown. I wasn't myself anymore. It's like a huge restart... It's hard to accept."

— Leo, *de facto* deported at age 12 from Southern California

Forced family separation produces a sequence of losses, each with its own psychological signature — and a lifetime of consequences that no enforcement record will ever fully document.

THE FEAR THAT FOLLOWS FAMILIES EVERYWHERE

Understanding why families returned to Mexico matters, because the circumstances of return shape children's experiences in fundamental ways. Not all children in this study followed a formally deported parent. Many returned because their parents faced compounding difficulties in the United States — constant fear of deportation, workplace discrimination, limited economic mobility, and a growing sense that they were raising children in a hostile environment. When fear and precarity make staying feel impossible, return is hardly a free choice. Some scholars call this compulsory return (Roberts et al. 2017) — a condition produced by enforcement even when no officer ever appears at the door.

“La migra, la migra.”

— Roberto's mother's warning — a game she taught him at age five to prepare for an ICE raid that never came

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Even within compulsory return, children's experiences varied. Roughly half of the families in this study who returned without formal deportation made deliberate efforts to prepare their children — teaching them Spanish, facilitating connections with extended family, and introducing their hometowns through storytelling and Google Earth virtual tours. This preparation mattered, softening though never eliminating the trauma of uprooting. For children whose departure was sudden, no such framework existed. Some parents told their children they were going on vacation, unable to find another way to explain what was happening. When the permanence became clear, children struggled with the loss of their home and the confusion of not having been told the truth. And for all of these children — prepared or not — one reality remained: going back was not a real option. The depression and isolation that followed were common across interviews, for some continuing long after families had settled into life in Mexico.

MENTAL HEALTH AND LONG-TERM HARM

The mental health consequences of forced displacement are severe and underserved — and for many children, they did not diminish upon arrival in Mexico. They intensified. Yecenia watched her father taken by ICE at 14; she stopped eating and began self-harming. Eduardo and Yoli were told they were visiting Mexico — weeks passed before they understood they weren't going back. Both fell into depression; Eduardo also began self-harming. What awaited them was not the home their parents may have described, but another form of exile: a country where they struggled with the language, had no friendships, and were visibly out of step with peers who had grown up together. The belonging they had lost in the U.S. was not waiting for them across the border.

Leo's experience captures this quietly. Transplanted into a Mexican classroom at 12, he retreated to the back row — a rational response to an environment where he had no social footing and no shared history with anyone around him.

“The nightmare started in the first year of middle school... I always sat at the back, I didn't want anybody to see me. I didn't want to be recognized.”

— Leo, on arriving in a Mexican school at age 12

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These are not adjustment difficulties — they are the direct consequences of U.S. immigration enforcement on the emotional lives of children: depression, self-harm, isolation, and a grief that persists into adulthood. Forced displacement does not simply move families across a border; it fractures the psychological foundations that children depend on to develop, to trust, and to belong.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Restructure Immigration Enforcement Around Due Process and Family Preservation

ICE in its current form operates with minimal accountability and a demonstrated willingness to separate families as standard practice. This brief does not call for ending immigration enforcement — it calls for ending an enforcement model built on family destruction. Consistent with Senator Van Hollen's approach, enforcement functions should transfer to agencies with clear legal accountability, enforceable due process protections, and a mandated commitment to family preservation. Child impact assessments should be required before any deportation proceeding involving a parent of a U.S.-born or U.S.-raised child.

2. Create a Right of Return and Resettlement Support for De Facto Deported Youth and Young Adults

The children documented in this research grew up in the United States. Their removal — whether direct or de facto — did not erase those ties, and U.S. policy should reflect that. Congress should establish a formal right of return for individuals who were de facto deported as minors, regardless of whether they were U.S.-born or lived in the United States without documentation. Growing up in the United States — attending its schools, forming its communities, building a life within its borders — constitutes a meaningful and recognizable claim to belonging, one that deportation does not extinguish.

For those who wish to return, the U.S. government should fund a resettlement program modeled on existing refugee assistance frameworks, providing transitional support for food and housing, and case management services to help returnees enroll in U.S. educational institutions or enter the workforce. For returnees who are not U.S. citizens, the program should include a clear and accessible pathway to citizenship. The permanent bars to reentry that currently trap these individuals in indefinite separation serve no legitimate enforcement interest — they simply compound the harm of a removal that, in many cases, should never have happened. Giving de facto deported youth and young adults the opportunity to come home, and the support to rebuild when they do, is not a radical proposition. It is a proportionate response to a documented, state-produced harm.

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