



# Resolutions To Action

LCWR Global Concerns Committee

Volume 20, Number 1

January 2011

## Immigration Enforcement and Family Separation

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### EXPERIENCE

In 1998, my husband and I were arrested by immigration enforcement officials. My three kids who were 13, 15, and 18 at the time, were left alone. Not knowing anyone, they had to stay by themselves and pretend that their parents were at home in order to avoid being separated and being placed in foster homes. They had to survive without Mom and Dad. We were taken to the Immigration Detention Center in San Pedro, California. I felt miserable, abandoned, alone, and rejected. I was not allowed to contact my husband, and we could not even have a visit together with our three children. This hurt me very much because we are a close family, and the children had to spend 10 minutes with me and 10 minutes with their father. What can you talk about in 10 minutes? It was a lot to talk about: how they were feeling, how they were doing, or ask if there was any problem at school. Ten minutes was nothing!

At that time my husband and I decided to apply for asylum, but we never expected to be in detention for so long. We spent 16 months in the detention center. I lived with many

women from different nationalities, races, languages, and cultures, and from all continents. We had only one thing in common: we were incarcerated. We were suffering, feeling frustrated and sad because our children were alone. The majority of the women were deported and did not have the opportunity to say good-bye, forgive me, or whatever they had to say to their kids before they were gone forever. At the same time, their children didn't have the right to touch, hug, or kiss their mothers before their deportation. That's wrong.

Each year more than a quarter million people are held in US immigration detention. The vast majority are incarcerated for administrative convenience. They are not serving criminal sentences, nor facing criminal charges. Some are refugees who have entered our country in exercising their legal right to seek asylum. Despite this, detainees are confined behind bars or barbed wire, separated from their families, deprived of basic freedoms, and subject to demeaning treatment. The growing use of detention is expensive, inhumane, and unnecessary. Reforms are needed to reduce the use of detention.

The number of individuals detained has grown dramatically. In 2001, the US detained approximately 95,000 individuals; by 2009, the number had grown to ap-

proximately 380,000. The average daily population of detained immigrants has grown from approximately 5,000 in 1994, to 19,000 in 2001. ICE's stated goal is to deport 400,000 non-citizens by the end of 2010.

### SOCIAL ANALYSIS

Immigration enforcement activities by US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and local law enforcement agencies operating under ICE have significantly increased over the past decade, affecting large numbers of children. Immigrant children currently comprise nearly one in four of all US children. It is estimated that more than 5 million of these children,

*Resolutions to Action* is an occasional publication of the Global Concerns Committee of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR). Members of the committee are: Kathleen Bryant, RSC; Judith Justinger, SSJ; Janet Lehmann, SC; Miriam Mitchell, SHSp; Dorothy Pagosa, SSJ-TOSF; Sharon Altendorf, PBVM; and Marie Lucey, OSF, staff. Please address correspondence to:

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the majority of whom are native-born US citizens, live in mixed-status families with one or more undocumented parent. While the debate over comprehensive immigration reform has often overlooked children who are citizens, inaction on immigration reform and ongoing enforcement measures have a significant impact on thousands of America's most vulnerable children.

The impacts on a child's well-being and family unity resulting from such enforcement activities are immeasurable. They include separation (sometimes permanent) from one or both parents due to detention and/or deportation, interruptions in schooling, short and long-term emotional trauma, and economic hardship due to the loss of

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the family breadwinner. In many cases, schools, early learning, and child care centers, social service agencies, and communities are unprepared to respond adequately to protect the interest of the children left behind. Often, detained parents are incapable of making child care arrangements, resulting in the unnecessary placement of their child in the child welfare system. Once a child is placed into foster care, it is extremely difficult for a detained parent to reunite with his or her child, especially if the parent is transferred to an out-of-state detention facility or deported before regaining custody. There is no reason a

child should suffer the trauma of being separated from a parent or end up in the child welfare system when there are tangible solutions to prevent that from happening.

The enforcement of our immigration laws should not conflict with our obligation to protect the rights of children. ICE should ensure that parents and primary caregivers of the minors are identified and, when appropriate, released into the community on bond or parole, or into non-custodial alternatives to detention programs. Every effort should be made to ensure that children are not present or engaged in enforcement activities, and families, social workers, and lawyers should be able to locate those who are detained. Additionally, children consequently placed in the foster care system should receive appropriate care, and parents should be able to participate in all court proceedings and case plans involving the care and custody of their children.

## REFLECTION

Pope John Paul II recognized over a decade ago that immigration as a whole was becoming a significant social and political problem. In his message for World Migration Day, 1996 he wrote:

"The church acts in continuity with Christ's mission. In particular, she asks herself how to meet the needs while respecting the law of those persons who are not allowed to remain in a national territory. Thus it is important to help illegal immigrants to complete the necessary administrative papers to obtain a residence permit. Social and charitable institutions can contact authorities in order to seek appropriate and lawful solutions. This kind of effort should be made especially on behalf of those who, after a long stay, are so deeply

rooted in the local society that returning to their country of origin would be equivalent to a form of reverse emigration, with serious consequences particularly for the children."

Last summer, President Obama addressed the nation on the issue stating, "The issue of immigration has become once more a source of fresh contention in our country, with the passage of a controversial law in Arizona and the heated reactions we've seen across

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America. Indeed, it is this constant flow of immigrants that helped to make America what it is."

In summary, the system is broken. Parents are taken away from their children and the family falls apart. When separation from their family occurs, the child may lack a good education or not do well in school and end up in criminal activities. They do not have sufficient emotional support when these tragic events happen. They feel abandoned, suffering in silence. And that is wrong.

## ACTION

1. Educate yourself about this issue. One recommended video: [www.abusedthepostvilleraid.com](http://www.abusedthepostvilleraid.com)
2. Support the immigration reform campaign; contact your congressional representatives
3. Be the voice of the immigrant talking in your community on their behalf
4. Visit the following websites: [www.justiceforimmigrants.org](http://www.justiceforimmigrants.org) [www.cliniclegal.org/](http://www.cliniclegal.org/) [www.immigrationforum.org/](http://www.immigrationforum.org/) [www.detentionwatchnetwork.org/](http://www.detentionwatchnetwork.org/)