Deportation's forgotten children

The Help Separated Families Act will help end the suffering that our broken system causes children and immigrant parents who are torn apart.

By Karen Bass and Lucille Roybal-Allard

February 11, 2013

As Congress looks toward meaningful immigration reform, we must take care not to neglect one of the most heartbreaking problems within the current, broken system: what happens to children when their parents or guardians are deported.

Currently, according to the Applied Research Center's report "Shattered Families," at least 5,000 children of immigrants live in U.S. foster care because their parents were detained or deported. If the current trends hold, the center estimates, 15,000 more children over the next five years will be ripped away from their mothers and fathers as a result of federal immigration enforcement actions.

In the wake of immigration arrests, law enforcers often don't allow detained immigrant parents the opportunity to make
proper arrangements for the care of their children. Kids can come home from school, only to find their mothers and fathers gone.

When a child enters the foster-care system, detained parents often have little input into plans for their children’s care, since the hearings and proceedings that determine those arrangements tend to take place far from the detention centers where immigrants are held. Once parents have been taken into custody or deported, caseworkers report, it is difficult for children to maintain contact with them.

All of these factors increase the chances that parental rights may be inappropriately terminated in cases where parents are involved in immigration proceedings, resulting in permanent family separation.

Even when detained parents are released and allowed to remain in the United States, roadblocks exist to the reunification process.
If a child has entered the foster-care system, parents must meet the requirements of a child-welfare case plan to regain custody of their kids. This plan may require parents to demonstrate that they can meet the health and welfare needs of their children, yet Medicaid, most mental health services and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families are not available to many of them because of their immigration status.

Additionally, parents may be asked to find a baby-sitter who is in the country legally or to prove "legitimate employment." With the clock ticking, undocumented parents, who face barriers to getting services or jobs because of their immigration status, can permanently lose their parental rights, leaving child welfare agencies to care for their children if they cannot be placed with a documented family member.

For victims of domestic abuse or other forms of gender-based violence, the situation can be even more tragic. Undocumented victims of domestic violence can face an impossible situation: either staying with their abusers and suffering violent attacks or risking detention and the possible loss of their children by speaking out.

Once parents are deported, the challenges to reuniting with their children in the United States become even greater. In most cases, children are reunited with their deported parents only if foreign consulates are able to get involved and advocate on the parents' behalf. Furthermore, some social workers and family court judges may believe that children of deported immigrants are better off living in the foster-care system here in the United States than they would be living with their parents in another country.

One step toward a saner policy is contained in a bill introduced in Congress last year by one of us (Roybal-Allard), the Help Separated Families Act. The legislation, which Rep. Bass will co-sponsor when it is reintroduced in the upcoming Congress, would make it far more difficult to terminate parental rights solely because of immigration status, and it would also allow foster children to be placed in the best homes for them, regardless of the immigration status of a potential guardian.

This legislation won’t end all of the suffering that our broken immigration system causes children and families, but it’s a good start. For too long, the youngest and most vulnerable voices in our immigration debate have been ignored.

We live in a country defined both by its proud immigrant heritage and by its enduring commitment to families. Ultimately, immigration reform will not be successful unless it protects children, prevents families from being torn apart and shows the world America means what it says when it speaks out on the importance of respecting human rights.
Rep. Karen Bass (D-Los Angeles) serves as founder and co-chair of the Congressional Caucus on Foster Youth. Rep. Lucille Roybal-Allard (D-East Los Angeles) is also a member of the Congressional Caucus on Foster Youth.

MORE FROM THE TIMES

Princess Diana museum to close, contents go to sons William, Harry
Untouched water as old as 2.6 billion years is found: Don't drink it
Kim Kardashian's bikini puts baby bump on full display
Signs of boy's abuse missed by L.A. County social workers
Mysterious rocks stolen from Death Valley National Park

FROM AROUND THE WEB

11 Foods You Can't Buy Anywhere Anymore | The Fiscal Times
22 Things You Should Never Do Again After 50 | AARP.org
13 Colleges That Aren't Worth the Money | Daily Finance
A kitchen remodel for under $5K | HomeGoods
What Toyota Doesn't Want You to Know About the Prius | Consumer Car Reviews

Hard Immigration Case?
www.kleymanFirm.com

UNICEF USA: Official Site
www.unicefusa.org
zaglossus at 8:58 AM February 14, 2013
The L.A. Times has been in the pocket of the pro-illegal immigrant lobby for some time. Its editorials and op-eds consistently support weakening or abolition of immigration laws. A favorite tactic is maudlin stories about innocents affected by enforcement. By their logic, no father or mother with minor children should ever have to go to jail even for many crimes besides illegal immigration.

whiteyard1904 at 7:03 AM February 13, 2013
How many is enough? When do the Citizens finally understand illegals are doing to our wages what the FED is doing to our money. Now the cry is to import millions of engineers and doctors, all high tech and all cut rate. The imported engineers and techs should be identified so Citizens can make there lives miserable like they are making our childrens lives. The message must go out to the world that there are no more seats at the dinner table. How can a student pay off the debt of college when green cards are printed like one dollar bills.

David Molnar at 1:35 PM February 12, 2013
I wonder why any caring parent would intentionally put their children in a position where this could happen? I also wonder why, since families are so important to Mexicans, parents simply don’t take their children with them when they are deported. Don’t tell me about the ‘pain’ of taking a child to a country they have never known, as Mexicanos never worry about that when they drag their children with them to a strange country when they illegally enter the United States.
Corrections

Photos: A crash course in aviation ruins
Comparing the Honda Fit, Fiat 500e and Nissan Leaf

Jonathan Gold quiz: Test your knowledge of popcorn

Photos: Top cyber attacks of 2013

Los Angeles Times

Copyright 2013

A Tribune Newspaper website