

# Deported adults are leaving their citizen children behind

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In the five months since immigration agents knocked on her door, Norma Villeda has sold her home and furnishings and shuttered her husband's business. She now sleeps in the living room of her sister-in-law's trailer, what's left of her possessions packed into three suitcases.

But the biggest loss has yet to come.

When she returns to her native Mexico at the end of this month, at the order of U.S. immigration officials, she will leave behind her daughter, Nancy, a U.S.-born high school senior who aspires to go to college.

"The reason my parents came here was to start a new future, have something better," said Nancy, who has a 3.9 grade point average at Apex High School. "I felt like if I gave that up, their hard work would be in vain."

As the federal government has ramped up immigration enforcement in the past few years, it has deported tens of thousands of immigrants, some of whom had lived illegally in the United States for a decade or more. The parents among them face a decision: take their American-born children to countries where they might not be able to afford education or medical care, or leave them with friends or relatives in the United States.

Immigration lawyers, advocates and Mexican consular officials say many are choosing the latter, because they fear their children have no future in the native countries of their parents. The situation has become so common that some now counsel parents on how to select a caregiver and transfer legal guardianship.

Attracta Kelly, an immigration lawyer with the N.C. Justice Center, said she has had several clients who chose to leave their children, most because they wanted them to finish their schooling here. In every case, she said the decision was "excruciating."

Federal immigration officials say parents are responsible for their predicaments.

"Parenthood does not make you immune from having to comply with the nation's laws, and the responsibility for any negative consequences lies squarely with the violator,"

Ivan Ortiz, a spokesman for Immigration and Customs Enforcement, known as ICE, said in a statement.

When Norma and Carlos made it across the Rio Grande as teenagers in the late 1980s, they faced little risk of being deported.

Enforcement was scant, and for the few illegal immigrants who were caught, having U.S.-born children was often enough to persuade a judge to allow them to stay.

Now, the government grants leniency in only the most extreme cases.

Norma is being deported because she and Carlos failed to show up for an immigration court date in 1997. (He was deported in October.)

They say they were taken in by a Florida scam artist, posing as a lawyer, who promised to get them visas. They paid him \$300 each, and when they heard nothing further, figured he had stolen their money.

But when immigration agents found them this summer, they discovered that he had filed a political asylum request and failed to tell them about the court date where it would be heard.

When they didn't show up, the judge ordered them deported, making them fugitives. They say they never knew.

If not for that missed court date, they would have soon become legal residents.

They have parents and siblings who are U.S. citizens, and more than a decade ago, Norma and Carlos were approved for family-based visas. But because of immigration quotas, they are still on the waiting list to receive them.

ICE's priority is finding fugitives who have committed crimes or pose a threat to national security, Ortiz said. But he added that the agency has a mandate to pursue all fugitives, even those with clean criminal records.

Norma will take her son - a U. S. citizen - with her, but she has found a friend willing to take Nancy in until she leaves for college. Nancy - shy and devoted to her mother - agreed.

Norma says she wants Nancy to get the education she couldn't, growing up in the Mexican state of Queretaro. There, her family didn't have enough money for food or school tuition.

Secondary education in Mexico is not free.

