

Webb: Let's remember the children as we reform immigration

Deportation worries can have harmful impact on kids

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In all of the heated rhetoric and frequent invective about undocumented immigrants and the need for immigration reform, it appears that we are missing a large piece of the puzzle: the impact of our broken immigration system on the future of our nation's children.

The 11 million or so undocumented immigrants currently in the United States are raising approximately 4.5 million U.S. citizen children. Almost all of them were born in the United States, and many of them have a U.S. citizen parent.

In 2012, an estimated 152,426 U.S. citizen children lost at least one parent to deportation. Since 1998, more than half a million U.S. citizen children watched as at least one of their parents was placed in handcuffs, taken to jail and then deported with no legal right of reunification in this country. These figures do not include the hundreds of thousands of other children eligible for status under Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals whose parents have also been deported.

Say what you will about "anchor babies" and birthright citizenship, the fact remains that under the U.S. Constitution, a child born in this country is a citizen of the United States. These children will grow up to be the workforce that pays taxes to build roads and bridges and sustain us in our old age, to serve in the Army and Navy and Air Force that protect our borders and our national security, who will be our grandchildren's teachers and doctors and firefighters and police officers and, yes, even our politicians.

As a nation, we need to understand that the policies we embrace now - or fail to change - will have a significant and lasting effect on the next generation of Americans. Studies have shown that children with at least one parent who is undocumented experience symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder at rates higher than veterans returning from war zones. This is true regardless of whether the family has had an actual experience with immigration authorities - children who live in constant fear of losing a parent experience anxiety, fearfulness, sadness, repeated memories, thoughts, dreams or images about losing a parent, avoid activities like school or sports, and report being hyper-alert or vigilant.

What happens when children grow up in a constant state of fear? Mental health professionals call this "toxic stress." When children, or adults, live for long periods of time with high levels of fear or anxiety, stress-induced hormones like adrenalin and cortisol cause physical changes in the body, changes that have been shown to lead to chronic illnesses like diabetes or high blood pressure or heart disease.

Forget humanitarian and moral concerns - do we want to raise a generation of kids who are so stressed as children that they are less able to lead long productive lives to support the rest of us?

Speaking of productivity, how does having an undocumented parent or parents affect a child's educational prospects? As you can probably guess, it is not for the better. A 2010 [Urban Institute](#) study of immigration-related raids in six different U.S. cities showed that 20 percent of children in these communities experienced a decline in their grades following the raids. Children with at least one undocumented parent have more trouble concentrating on their schoolwork and are more likely to miss school days or change schools than children with citizen parents.

In addition, lack of resources and fear of deportation result in lower usage of health services, including well-child care, vaccinations and other basic health care services, which also will have a negative impact on academic readiness and learning. As a result, these bilingual U.S. citizen children are growing up with less-than-optimum health, education or occupational training.

Again, setting aside moral or humanitarian concerns, these are the children who are going to grow up to take care of the rest of us. From a purely selfish perspective, don't we want our next generation of citizens to be the best they can be?

Comprehensive immigration reform is what needs to happen. Families, the basic building block of our civilization, need to be our priority. Children need to grow up in secure homes, attend school and access basic health services without being in constant fear that mom will not return from an outing to the grocery store or that dad will be arrested simply for working to support his family.

We can do this. We must do this for our own futures.

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