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### Failing families

#### Immigration enforcement policies unfairly hurt many children who are citizens

By Lavanya Sithanandam

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When I walked into the exam room, I knew something was wrong. My 8-year old patient, usually an extroverted, charming boy, was angry. He sat with his arms crossed and refused to look at me. His exhausted mother recounted how one week ago, her husband, after arriving home from a 12-hour shift at work, had been arrested in front of his children and taken away in handcuffs. He was now sitting in an Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention center in Frederick. The mother asked me to evaluate her son for a one-week history of poor appetite, difficulty with sleeping, and wheezing.

As a pediatrician working in Montgomery County, home to the largest immigrant community in Maryland, I have seen firsthand the devastating effects that aggressive immigration enforcement policies can have on families. Many of these children are citizens, born in the United States to at least one undocumented parent. Yet these children often experience what no U.S. citizen (or any child, for that matter) should. They live in constant fear of abandonment because they have seen and heard of neighbors and family members being picked up and deported within days.

My patient, a "citizen child" himself, was exhibiting symptoms of depression, and like other children who have lost a parent to detention centers, he perceives his father's arrest as somehow being his fault. His mother, who must now take over her husband's 15-year role as the family's breadwinner, is struggling to pay the bills, to make the lengthy drive to see her husband, and to take her son to the doctor. These parents are good people: hardworking and honest immigrants from West Africa who pay their taxes and take good care of their children. They struggle to make a decent life for their family, despite a grueling, 70-hour workweek.

Unfortunately, their story is not unique. There are more than 5 million citizen children in this country - and sadly, the likelihood that one or both of their parents will be deported is increasing. In order to meet arrest quotas, ICE agents are increasingly going after "soft targets": immigrants such as my patient's father, with no criminal record and for whom ICE had not issued a deportation order. Some of these people are picked up by chance, at work or at home. Some are victims of "residential raids" where immigration authorities knock on door after door with no evidence that the inhabitants are undocumented until they can get someone to admit that he or she is here illegally.

Sometimes, racial profiling is an issue - as in the case, recently revealed, of a January 2007 raid on a 7-Eleven



in Baltimore. Officers detained 24 Latino men, few of them with criminal records, in an apparent effort to meet a quota for arrests.

The future for families like my 8-year-old patient's looks grim. My patient's suffering will probably have no influence on his father's deportation proceedings, given the high legal standards of "extreme hardship" that must be met in order for his father to stay with his family. The boy will most likely be forced to start a new life in a country he has never even visited.

Immigration policy is complicated and emotionally charged, but punishing citizen children should be at the bottom of ICE's priorities. It is time to once again consider a fair and comprehensive approach to immigration reform. One promising proposal is the "Child Citizenship Protection Act" (introduced this year by Rep. Jose Serrano of New York), which would authorize an immigration judge to prevent deportation of an immigrant when it is in the best interest of his or her citizen children.

It is essential to enact laws that will promote family reunification, fairness and dignity over current enforcement tactics that tear families apart.

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