Editorial

Dismantling the deportation nation

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While the majority of undocumented immigrants in the United States hail from Mexico and Latin America, others come from China, India, Ireland and many other countries. The over 1,000 deportations processed daily in the United States, mean that the estimated 11 million undocumented people in the United States live in a constant state of anxiety and fear. Thanks to the move toward visibility promoted by the DREAMers, we now have access to many more of their stories and so they are no longer just numbers.

By April 2014, our current president will have presided over 2 million deportations. Latino organizations that have been staunch allies of the president and have a history of supporting his immigration policies are urging Obama to provide relief to the millions of families disrupted and devastated by the reality and threat of deportation. For example, Janet Murguía, president of the National Council of La Raza, has implored Obama to immediately halt deportations. She points out that since more people have been deported under his watch than any other president, unless he acts now, Obama's legacy will be that of "deporter-in-chief." Although a comprehensive immigration bill passed in the Senate in June 2013, getting it voted on, let alone passed in the House of Representatives, seems like a long shot. While some optimists continue to push for congressional action, more and more reform advocates are urging the president to take executive action and issue a moratorium on deportations. Meanwhile, activists across the country are engaging in an intense campaign to secure relief from these daily deportations; they are using a range of strategies including lobbying politicians, conducting hunger strikes, holding protests at detention centers, and making use of social media to mount campaigns to secure the release of specific detained immigrants. Arguing that deportations are destroying families and causing massive suffering, even mainstream Latino organizations such as the Hispanic Congressional Caucus recommend that the president extend Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) to the millions of undocumented immigrants who are believed to meet the qualifications addressed in the Senate bill (that is, they should have arrived in the United States before 31 December 2011, they would be required to pay fees and back taxes, and they would not qualify if they have been convicted of a felony).

It has been well established that young activists have been leaders of this social movement for human rights. Hinda Seif, Char Ullman and Guillermina Núñez-Mchiri, the editors of this special issue, remind us that it is through the creative and constant efforts of young people that DACA came to be, and they continue to be at the forefront of the struggle to not only actuate immigration reform but also to challenge the problematic construction of “illegality” that dehumanizes immigrants and enables many to dismiss them as deserving of deplorable treatment. This special issue focuses on Mexican undocumented students and the struggles they encounter as they push for reform while concurrently dealing with the obstacles placed on them because they are constructed as “illegal” within the borders of the United States. They work to secure their human rights, to educate themselves, and to create a future for themselves and their families on both sides of the border. As the editors of this special issue note, even those young people who have qualified for DACA still live in an unstable and vulnerable situation since they are not guaranteed US citizenship after their 2-year deferred status runs out.

One unique aspect of this special issue on Mexican immigrant students and education is that it brings together the cutting-edge research of established scholars as well as young, undocumented emerging scholars and scholar activists who have conducted research on the lives and struggles of Mexican immigrant youth in various parts of the country. Utilizing approaches from a variety of disciplines and interdisciplinary locations, the issue focuses on the social and political challenges facing undocumented Mexican students in the United States, and illustrates the creative strategies these students undertake to cope with and transform their situations. Foremost among these strategies is resisting their construction as “illegal” and thereby changing the terms of the immigration debate.

Many of the authors included in this special issue have a long history of engagement with immigrant rights work both within and outside of academia. Tania Unzueta Carrasco, for example, is currently an organizer with the National Day Laborer Organizing Network and she is one of the co-founders of the hugely influential Immigrant Youth Justice League. In her article (co-written with Hinda Seif), she explores the strategies young people are implementing to challenge not only the draconian immigration laws in the United States, but also the strategies and politics of the reform movement itself. Negrón-González, likewise, examines the ways that young activists understand and shape their identities and their activism.

The articles in this issue also shed light on populations not usually discussed in current research, including students from small rural communities that are new sites for immigration. While the bulk of the research in the field tends to focus on undocumented students in sites with large immigrant populations within the United States, two articles extend this focus to consider the impact of immigration policies on young people in Mexico. One article traces the path of students from rural Mexico to Iowa, and documents how children from families that are planning to migrate are isolated from their community even before they leave

the country. Another article examines the experiences of older students who are ineligible for status adjustment or “choose” to return to Mexico to continue their education, given their precarious status in the United States as undocumented.

As we read these engaging pieces focused on Mexican students, we must not forget that global migration – forced and voluntary – is on the rise, and the experiences described here capture but one slice of the many stories of the multitudes impacted by our perverse immigration policy. We have much to learn from the provocative perspectives explored in this issue; yet there are also many other stories that need to be told. This issue invites us to begin to broaden our understanding of the range and diversity of immigrant experiences, and motivates us to continue scholarship and activism that inspires a just and humane approach toward immigration.

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