An undesirable inheritance; U.S.-born kids of illegal immigrants twice as likely as others to face poverty

The Washington Post

December 9, 2009 Wednesday, Met 2 Edition

Distribution: Maryland

Section: METRO; Pg. B01

Length: 2149 words

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Body

Eight-year-old Alex picked up a 75-cent can of fruit punch from one of the grocery store's shelves and called excitedly to his mother in Spanish.

"Mami! Can we buy something to drink?"

Maria, 38, gave her stocky third-grader a sympathetic smile. She'd already made Alex and his 3-year-old sister, Emelyn, walk 30 minutes under a broiling sun from their house in suburban Maryland to the Safeway, the closest place that accepts Emelyn's federal milk and cereal vouchers. Then they'd trekked 20 minutes more to this cheaper Latino grocery so Maria, an ***illegal immigrant*** from Mexico who can't afford a car and wouldn't be eligible for a driver's license anyway, could save $3.40 on chicken.

"At home, my son," Maria said soothingly. "When we get home, you can drink some water."

"But I'm really thirsty," Alex persisted.

"No, son. At home."

"But I need to drink now."

"No! No!" snapped Maria. "I already said, 'No!' "

She hates these moments, she said later -- these unavoidable reminders of the hardships her ***U.S.-born*** children ***face*** because she and their father, Luis, are ***illegal immigrants***.

Of all the disadvantages that ***U.S.-born*** children of Hispanic ***immigrants*** might confront, none is more significant than being raised by parents who are in the country illegally.

Forty percent -- or 3.3 million of these children -- have at least one parent who is an ***illegal immigrant***, mostly from Mexico or Central America, according to a recent analysis of census data by demographer Jeffrey S. Passel of the *Pew Hispanic Center*. And researchers warn that the long-term consequences for the country could be profound.

"The fact that so many in this population ***face*** these initial disadvantages has huge implications in terms of their education, their future labor market experience, their integration in the broader society, and their political participation," said *Roberto Gonzales*, a professor at the University of Washington who has studied this generation.

The most immediate result has been a substantial increase in the number of American children growing up in ***poverty***. Partly because ***illegal immigrants*** tend to have low levels of education and partly because their immigration status makes it harder to move up the job ladder, their ***U.S.-born*** children are almost ***twice*** as ***likely*** to be poor as the children of legal ***immigrants*** or native parents, the Pew Hispanic Center found.

To supporters of ***immigrants***, that's an argument for offering a path to legalization for the adults in "mixed-status families." These are households in which the parents are in the country illegally while their ***U.S.-born*** children are entitled to all the benefits and aid that their parents are not.

"When you talk about someone who is undocumented, the chances are extremely high that they are in a mixed-status family. . . . Legalization would be one of the best anti-***poverty*** strategies we could employ," said Frank Sharry, executive director of the advocacy group *America's Voice*.

But advocates for stricter immigration laws see these families as one of the most compelling reasons to clamp down on ***illegal*** immigration.

"Not because [***illegal immigrants***] are ripping us off or don't work hard," said Mark Krikorian, executive director of the Center for Immigration Studies, "but because they're collecting benefits for their children. In our society, people with a fifth-grade education can hold two or three jobs and still not afford to support their families. There's no way for them to avoid putting a strain on the social-welfare system."

A family on the edge

Alex's parents, who spoke on the condition that the family's last name and address not be identified, have been struggling for the past two years, ever since Luis was fired from his construction job for using a false Social Security number.

Luis, a 27-year-old Guatemalan, said he picked up valuable skills as an electrician during his four years with the construction company. But since he was let go, he has only landed occasional jobs as a day laborer, earning no more than $200 a week, and often far less.

Maria's efforts to supplement their income by babysitting children in their house brings in an additional $100. Nearly all of the children's clothing and toys and much of their food are paid for by Maria's sister, who is also an ***illegal immigrant*** but who is having more success cleaning houses and has no children.

It was early evening as Alex, a sturdily built boy with close-cropped black hair, almond-shaped eyes and pronounced front teeth, sprawled on his Spider-Man sheets to watch a "SpongeBob SquarePants" cartoon -- his body convulsing in giggles at the antics on the screen.

Downstairs in the kitchen, his father stared at a bill from Pepco.

"It says we need to pay $287 in two weeks, or they'll cut off the power," said Luis. "I don't know what to do. We're already behind on the rent. But we need the electricity to run Alex's asthma machine."

The thought of applying for help from the government did not occur to Luis: He knows ***illegal immigrants*** are barred from almost all forms of public assistance. But as U.S. citizens, his children are eligible, not only for energy aid but also for all government relief programs.

Emelyn receives $50 to $70 per month in federal checks to cover milk and other basics, while Alex gets free lunch and breakfast at school and has received treatment for his asthma through Medicaid, the health insurance program for the poor.

But Maria's anxieties about her legal status have prevented her from getting the children food stamps, which can be prorated to cover only eligible members of a household.

So paranoid about running afoul of immigration authorities that she avoids taking buses and hanging out in malls, Maria finally worked up the nerve to put in an application for food stamps last winter. But when she got a letter requesting more documentation of the children's citizenship, she let the matter drop.

"They ask you so many questions at that office," she said. "It makes me nervous."

Maria also was having difficulty renewing Alex's Medicaid. She used to present a letter from Luis's boss attesting to his salary, but that was no longer possible, and she wasn't aware that there were other ways of establishing their income.

Her experience mirrors that of many ***illegal immigrants***, whose ***U.S.-born*** children are far less ***likely*** to get health insurance than the children of legal ***immigrants*** or the native-born.

The expired Medicaid has already had consequences for Alex. Though he still has enough medication cartridges for the machine he uses to help him breathe at home, unless he gets a new inhaler, the nurse can't treat him at school. He's already missed nearly three weeks of school because of asthma flare-ups.

Sometimes, as she contemplates the price her children are paying, Maria wonders whether she should have ever left Mexico.

She grew up along a main rail line in a southern town, where her widowed mother ran a small grocery and often gave food and shelter to the bedraggled Central American stowaways passing through on their journey north.

One of them was Luis, who'd dropped out of high school to head to the United States and escape the far more severe ***poverty*** of his childhood in Guatemala City.

Maria fell in love with the younger, soft-spoken Guatemalan migrant and eagerly agreed to join him in Maryland when he sent money for a smuggler to bring her to him. At the time, she was nine months pregnant with Alex, who was born at *Holy Cross Hospital* in Silver Spring.

Initially, they lived in a small, dank basement that Maria believes fueled Alex's asthma. In the eight years since, the family has slowly improved their living quarters. Most recently, they've moved to a small, two-story brick house in Montgomery County, subletting the basement, the den off the living room and one of the three bedrooms to five separate tenants.

It's not clear how much longer they'll be able to afford this arrangement. At least partly due to the strain of their financial troubles, the couple, who never officially married, are considering separating.

Even with their future so unsettled, Maria said she feels it's too late to return to Mexico. Her closest siblings all now live in the United States. Luis has no doubt his children should remain here.

"Yes, they live poorly," he said, "but they're still so much better off than if they were in Guatemala."

Anxiety's staying power

How all this early adversity will play out for Alex and the millions of other ***U.S.-born*** offspring of ***illegal immigrants*** is hard to predict. Most are still young. A recent in-depth survey of those in their late teens and early 20s suggests many carry the burden well beyond childhood, said Roberto Gonzales, the professor who conducted the study. Most of those interviewed felt a responsibility to help their parents by getting jobs at an early age, contributing $400 to $600 a month even as they struggled to complete high school or go to college.

"This impacts their own ability to save or to move into better neighborhoods, which then affects their own children," noted Gonzales.

There is also the sometimes-subtle-but-still-powerful psychological impact of knowing that their parents don't have the same rights as them and can theoretically be locked up and deported at any moment.

Vanessa Castillo remembers that anxiety well. As a child, her grandmother would call her into the house and draw the curtains at the sight of UPS trucks, which she mistook for immigration enforcement.

Her Mexican-born parents and grandmother eventually received legal status through a 1986 amnesty. Yet "even now, I'm very conscious of walking in somewhere and being cautious of making sure that I fit in, that this is a crowd that will make me feel like I belong," said Castillo, a 31-year-old college graduate who works for a child abuse prevention group in Southern California. "I guess I shouldn't really feel that because I was born here, and I have rights just like everybody else. But the truth is that there's always that fear, that sense that I will be questioned."

Alex's ambitions

Alex got his first inkling of his parents' precarious legal situation when "El Show de Cristina," a popular program on Spanish-language television, featured children whose parents chose to leave them in the United States when they were deported.

"For the next couple of weeks he'd say to me over and over again, 'Mami, I don't want you to go,' " said Maria. " 'I don't want to be without a mom and a dad.' "

But even if his parents are never threatened with deportation, their immigration status is curtailing Alex's prospects in other ways.

Once Maria mused that her son could become a lawyer or an electrical engineer. Now she and Luis are too focused on their day-to-day struggles to think about the future. Sure, it would be nice if their son could go to college, they say. "But honestly, I see very little possibility of that," said Maria. "It's so expensive."

Alex already appears to have absorbed that message.

In many ways he's a typical American boy -- decorating the walls of his tiny bedroom with drawings of dinosaurs and becoming animated as he describes the Transformer costume he wore for Halloween. He's attentive and obedient at his Montgomery County elementary school, where nearly all the children are also offspring of poor ***immigrants***. And he's in the top reading and math groups of his third-grade class.

Yet ask Alex what he thinks he might do when he grows up, and he looks surprised at the question. "I don't know," he mumbled. "A construction worker, maybe?" Then he perked up, remembering one of his mother's past jobs. "Or maybe I'll go to work at McDonald's."

To spend a day with Alex at school is to watch him grapple with obstacles that might further limit his ambitions.

He started kindergarten speaking almost no English, and though he graduated from the English for Speakers of Other Languages program last year, his teachers warn that he ***faces*** a long road to true fluency.

"I can't tell you how many ***kids*** who are technically not in ESOL have serious language issues," his writing teacher said, after helping Alex through a letter-writing assignment. "He has real difficulty processing the meaning of what he hears and then organizing his thoughts and producing a response."

Though Maria graduated from high school in Mexico, giving her more education than many Hispanic ***immigrant*** parents, she can't offer Alex much help. His math homework that day was an assignment about expressing numbers through words.

"I don't understand any of this," Maria muttered under her breath as she looked it over. She handed the worksheet to her son, who lay on the living room floor.

"Well, you should do it now, before we go out," she said.

Alex frowned at the paper.

"But I don't understand this. I can't do it."

"Just do it. Stop squirming. Concentrate, Alex."

Half an hour later, he handed Maria the page. It was riddled with errors.

"Good," she said. "Good job, my son."

Graphic

IMAGE; Ricky Carioti/the Washington Post; Three-year-old Emelyn plays with her 8-year-old brother, Alex, in his bedroom in their small house in Montgomery County. The children were born in the United States to Hispanic parents who are both in the country illegally.

IMAGE; Photos By Ricky Carioti/the Washington Post; Maria, who, like her husband, is in the country illegally, prepares dinner for the family. Maria's anxieties about her legal status have prevented her from getting her ***U.S.-born*** children food stamps, which can be prorated to cover only eligible members of a household. Below, Maria combs 3-year-old Emelyn's hair.

IMAGE

IMAGE

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Subject: ***ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS*** (89%); IMMIGRATION (88%); CHILDREN (88%); PRIMARY SCHOOLS (77%); HISPANIC AMERICANS (77%); FAMILY (77%); DEMOGRAPHIC GROUPS (74%); CENSUS (69%); POPULATION & DEMOGRAPHICS (69%); LABOR SECTOR PERFORMANCE (69%); ***POVERTY*** & HOMELESSNESS (65%); COLLEGE & UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS (50%)

Industry: GROCERY STORES & SUPERMARKETS (90%); PRIMARY SCHOOLS (77%); FRUIT & JUICE DRINKS (73%); MILK (55%); COLLEGE & UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS (50%)

Geographic: MARYLAND, USA (78%); UNITED STATES (92%); CENTRAL AMERICA (73%)

Load-Date: December 9, 2009