

Wyoming Tribune Eagle, May 26, 2016: “Immigrant children suffer most.” Casper Star Tribune, May 29: “Many immigrant children carry terrible burden.”

The immigrant experience has been on my mind lately, my own and others', and its effects on our offspring. Children of immigrants are subject to conflicting messages. Both parents and school personnel want the child to know that their way is “the” way.

In high school, when literature classes studied books like *Babi Yar*, my towheaded kids were labeled Nazis. The taunting did not cease until they organized a band and the head bully, wanting to learn to play the guitar, befriended them.

Other immigrant children suffer unimaginably, though some have written movingly about their conflicts. Maxine Hong Kingston detailed the suffering of girls subjected to Chinese traditional extreme devaluation of females. (Thankfully, much of this ideology has since been discarded.) Richard Rodriguez, who grew up in a Mexican-American household in LA, remembers his mother's women friends speaking fondly of light-skinned children. Rodriguez, whose skin was dark, suffered facial treatment with a mixture of egg white and lemon juice.

Let's reflect on American citizen-children who suffer the modern-day extreme equivalent of Kingston and Rodriguez. In life there are few more devastating experiences with lifelong reverberations than childhood trauma. The two most destructive traumas are abuse, physical and sexual, and the sudden, perhaps inexplicable loss of a parent. Mental-health research has shown that the most damaged adult and child patients have been those who sustain one or both of these traumas. By any measure of childhood misery, the loss or dissolution of a family is among the most adverse conditions a child can face.

The unexpected absence of a primary caregiver is a huge disruption in the child's life. To form secure attachments in early childhood, children must develop a faith that they can rely on parent figures to protect them and provide food, shelter, and loving attention. Sadly, many American children are deprived of that security, which leaves them with huge negative impacts. They grow up to be troubled, often dysfunctional, individuals.

When a threat arises that one or both parents may suddenly disappear, as is the case if one or the other or both parents are undocumented immigrants, a pervasive fear of authority figures, particularly police officers and judges, haunts their children. The youngsters are subject to panic attacks, mood swings, and depression. Luis H. Zayas in *“Forgotten Citizens”* (2015) calls it “The Making of American Exiles and Orphans.” It is to our everlasting shame that we as a country impose such a terrible burden on these most vulnerable of our fellow Americans.

The author, who has interviewed many such children, says it's easy to see the worry and fear in the children's comments. Mixed-status families impress on their children early on that they must be quiet and innocuous. When police are around at festivals or near their cars on the freeway, the injunction becomes a terrible burden. Often the children have no idea what it means that their parents lack "the papers"; the kids may assume that "papers" is the equivalent of the sheets they use for homework assignments.

"Citizen-children must help keep their family members' unauthorized statuses secret . . . they must make complicated moral decisions, such as whether to lie to preserve the secret. This is too great a responsibility for any child to carry without repercussions," writes Zayas.

The psychological and somatic fallout is tremendous. This monumental responsibility is thrust on a child at a time when social, emotional, and cognitive faculties are still developing. Worse happens when the child fails to observe the responsibility, hold it securely, or handle it properly: Emotional reactions of guilt and shame come to children as young as preschool-age when they feel they have failed. Months after the parent's initial arrest, Zayas found more than a third of the children were angry, clingy, and anxious.

Few options are available to undocumented immigrants to change their status to a legal one. Not only do orphans of fragmented families suffer the loss of one or both parents through deportation but also the disruptions of attachment and bonding bring withdrawal and despair. A judge recently ruled that, if they wish to plead that authorities not tear apart their families, such children do not deserve legal representation; even five-year-olds are expected to argue for themselves in front of a court of law.

To be forced into exile in another country is no less adverse. Child exiles face the consequences of going to an unfamiliar town, where they are expected to assimilate to a culture they know nothing about and navigate dangers they never experienced before. Forced to live in abject poverty, experience substandard (if any) schooling, and witness (if not experiencing) gang and criminal violence, the exiles suffer withdrawal and despair.

I do hope our Supreme Court will grant relief to the unhappy youngsters by upholding President Obama's immigrant action.