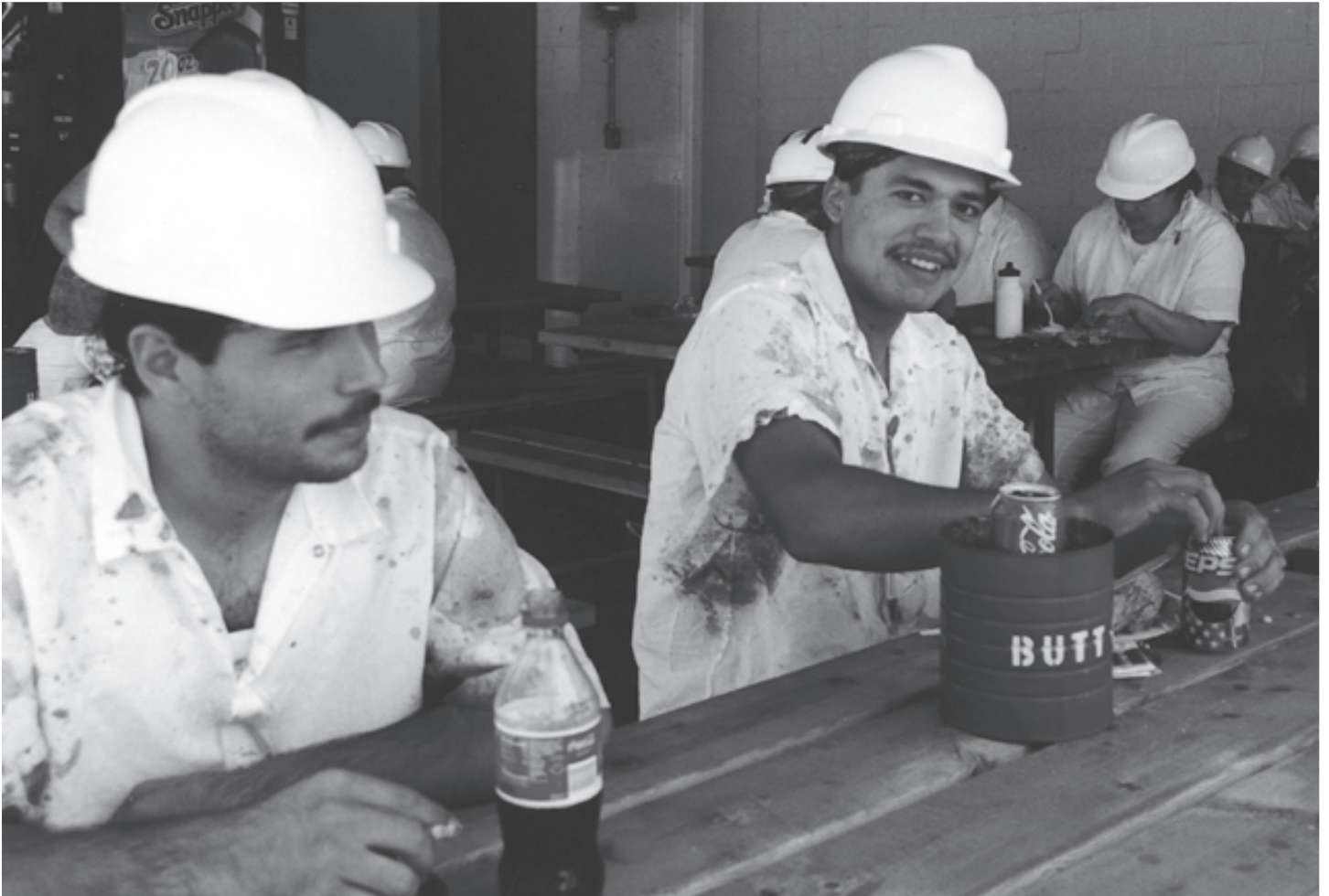


IN OUR OWN WORDS:

# IMMIGRANTS' EXPERIENCES IN THE NORTHWEST

FEBRUARY 2006



NORTHWEST FEDERATION OF COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

**THIS REPORT WOULD NOT HAVE BEEN  
POSSIBLE WITHOUT THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF:**

Idaho Community Action Network  
Comite Pro-Amnistia y Justicia Social, Washington  
Hate Free Zone Washington  
St. James Cathedral ESL, Washington  
Casa Latina, Washington  
Centro Latino, Washington  
Casa Hogar, Washington  
PCUN/CAUSA, Oregon  
Latinos Unidos Siempre (LUS), Oregon  
Para los Ninos, Washington  
Yakima Neighborhood Health Services, Washington  
Northwest Immigrant Rights Project, Washington

Cover photos courtesy of Claudio Beagarie

IN OUR OWN WORDS:  
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IN THE NORTHWEST**

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Northwest, along with the nation, is in the midst of a polarized and contentious debate about immigration. Politicians and the media paint conflicting pictures of the influence of immigrants on our communities and the economy, and argue whether and how the nation should welcome or discourage immigration. As this debate grows louder, seldom heard are the voices of immigrants themselves.

Sound decisions about immigration policy must be informed by the real experiences of immigrants. This report presents testimonies from 230 immigrants who live and work in Washington, Oregon, and Idaho. The stories documented here include those of traveling to the United States, working without legal protections, connecting with family members, dealing with discrimination, accessing basic services like health care and education, and navigating the immigration system.

The findings of this study are based not on rhetoric but on life experiences of immigrants living in the Northwest. Some of the key findings, echoed by immigrants of different national origins and life experiences, include:

- Policies to secure U.S. borders have led to serious human rights violations.
- For most immigrants, the immigration system is failing to provide meaningful pathways to citizenship.
- Immigrants often face workplace exploitation and discrimination because of their immigration status.
- Immigrants to the Northwest have little access to basic services and benefits, including health care and higher education.
- Many immigrants face discrimination and civil rights abuses due to their race, ethnicity, religion, and/or legal status.

This report concludes with policy recommendations that apply to both federal immigration policy and state-level responses to issues that affect immigrant communities. To address the key findings listed above, states and the federal government must work together to:

- Create meaningful pathways to citizenship.
- Strengthen and enforce worker protections.
- Broaden opportunities for immigrants to become a part of community life.
- Protect immigrants from civil rights violations and institutional discrimination.

## INTRODUCTION

The Northwest, along with the nation, is in the midst of a polarized and contentious debate about immigration. Politicians and the media paint conflicting pictures of the influence of immigrants on our communities and the economy, and argue whether and how the nation should welcome or discourage immigration. As this debate grows louder, seldom heard are the voices of immigrants themselves.

Sound decisions about immigration policy must be informed by the voices of those who are directly affected. This report presents testimonies from 230 immigrants who live and work in Washington, Oregon, and Idaho. The experiences documented here include those of traveling to the United States, working without legal protections, connecting with family members, dealing with discrimination, accessing basic services like health care and education, and navigating the immigration system.

This report presents immigrants' stories in their own voices. The stories collected here tell about life in the Northwest as an immigrant. The stories are grouped by topic, with findings based on collective experiences of the 230 people who were interviewed. The report concludes with policy recommendations based on these findings.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This report analyzes the experience of immigrants to the Northwest. The research for this report includes three components: a review of census data and literature on immigration to the region and the nation; in-depth, one-on-one interviews with 230 immigrant residents in Washington, Oregon, and Idaho; and interviews with advocates and grassroots organizers working with immigrant populations.

**Data and Literature Review:** The findings and recommendations in this report are informed by scholarly research on immigrants to the U.S. and their experiences. Background information about immigrants to the Northwest is derived from census data, with the understanding that census data is often of limited value when discussing immigrant populations. This is particularly true for immigrants without immigration status, because undocumented immigrants are more likely to be reluctant to interact with and answer detailed questions from census officials. Nevertheless, this data provides an overview and a context for understanding the scope of immigration to the region.

**Immigrant Survey Project:** The findings of this report are primarily derived from in-depth, one-on-one interviews with 230 individuals and/or families who currently reside in Oregon, Washington, or Idaho but were born in another country. Trained interview teams in each state utilized a

standard questionnaire and interview format.

When possible, interviews were conducted entirely in the interviewee's primary language; interpreters provided assistance when necessary. Interviews were conducted over a nine-month period between 2005 and 2006, and each interview lasted between 30 minutes and one hour. The interview form included closed-ended questions and open-ended questions designed to surface information about the immigration experience, including:

- reasons for migrating and method of travel
- family structure and location of family members
- work conditions, workplace discrimination, and prior work history
- access to health care
- access to public benefits
- detention by United States officials and other contacts with law enforcement in the United States
- ability to navigate the immigration system and visa applications
- integration into the community
- access to education

### Survey population:

- Interviewees ranged from 12 to 74 years of age, with an average age of 33 years.
- The interviewees immigrated from 19 countries on five continents, including North America, South America, Asia, Africa, and Europe.
- One goal of the study was to determine the extent and the ramifications of barriers that prevent people from attaining legal immigration status. Thus, particular emphasis was placed on identifying interviewees without legal permanent status or citizenship. Of the interview population, 75 percent of people did not have legal documentation, 14 percent were legal permanent residents, 7 percent had refugee status, and 4 percent had obtained citizenship.

**Expert Interviews:** Immigrant advocates and social service providers were interviewed to obtain a more complete view of some of the barriers that immigrants often face. Organizations interviewed include:

*Idaho Community Action Network, Idaho*  
*Comite Pro-Amnistia y Justicia Social,*  
*Washington Hate Free Zone Washington*  
*St. James Cathedral ESL, Washington*  
*Casa Latina, Washington*  
*Centro Latino, Washington*  
*Casa Hogar, Yakima Interfaith Coalition, Washington*  
*PCUN/CAUSA, Oregon*  
*Latinos Unidos Siempre (LUS), Oregon*  
*Para los Ninos, Washington*

*Yakima Neighborhood Health Services, Washington  
Northwest Immigrant Rights Project, Washington  
Idaho Office for Refugees  
National Employment Law Project*

## REPORT STRUCTURE

This report, consisting of seven chapters, compiles stories from the interviews, grouped by the subject of the stories, makes key findings based on the interviews, and makes recommendations for addressing the issues raised by these findings.

**Chapter 1**, “Who are the immigrants to the Northwest today?”, presents background information about immigrants to the Northwest based on census data.

**Chapter 2**, “Crossing the Border,” examines the reasons immigrants brave crossing the border, and describes the dangerous journeys immigrants make to enter the United States.

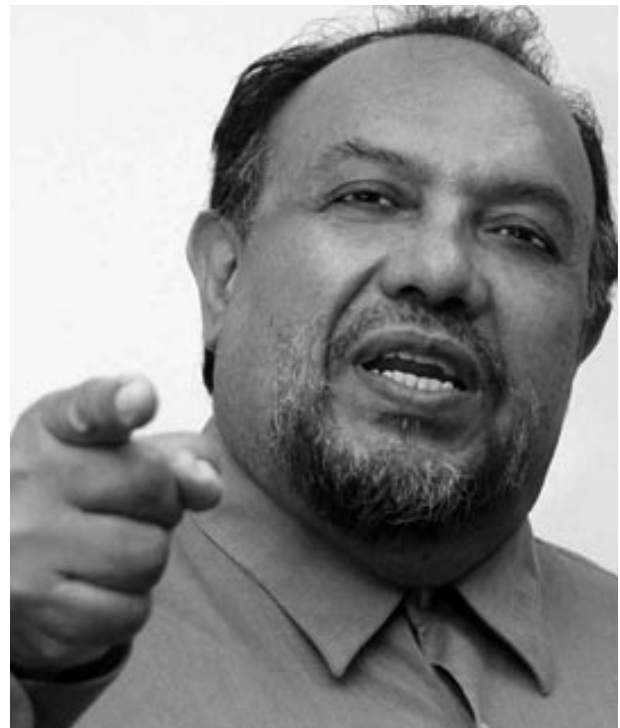
**Chapter 3**, “The Narrow Path to Citizenship,” discusses the difficulties immigrants reported in obtaining and retaining legal immigration status and citizenship.

**Chapter 4**, “Employment Discrimination and Exploitation,” recounts experiences of wage and hour exploitation, dangerous workplaces, discrimination and harassment on the job, and the loss of valuable skills when immigrants are unable to find work in their professions.

**Chapter 5**, “Health Care, Education, and Public Benefits,” shows the barriers preventing immigrants from accessing health care, higher education, and public benefits.

**Chapter 6**, “Civil Rights Violations and Exclusion from Communities,” contains stories of civil rights violations by government officials and institutional discrimination that keeps immigrants from integrating into their adopted communities.

**Chapter 7**, “Key Findings and Recommendations,” elaborates the key findings and recommends ways for the United States to eliminate: the human rights crisis on the border; barriers to citizenship; employment discrimination; barriers to health care, education, and public benefits; and civil rights violations.



*The Northwest has a wonderful and colorful immigrant past .... Now it is faced with a challenging but most exciting immigrant future. Our history has proven that people from all over world can come here become productive citizens and make us all richer because of the diversity.*

*The Northwest is a new gateway, with more immigrants from more diverse areas of the world coming to the region.*

**Magdaleno Rose-Avila, Executive Director,  
Northwest Immigrant Rights Project,  
Seattle, Washington**

Courtesy of Jack Storms

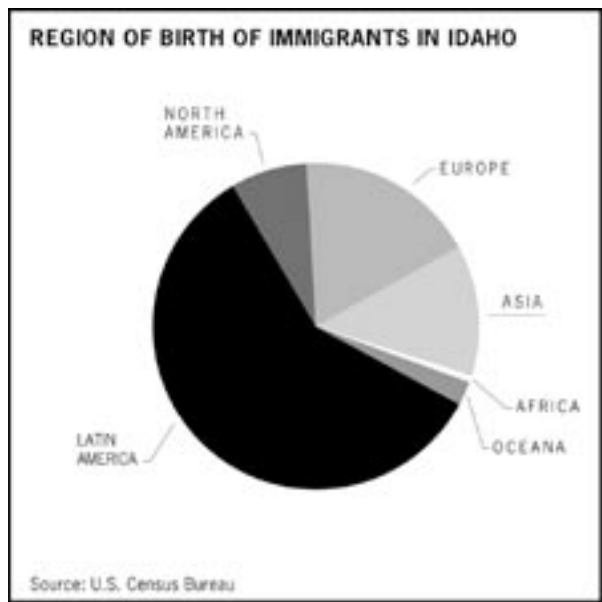
# CHAPTER 1

## WHO ARE IMMIGRANTS TO THE NORTHWEST TODAY?

Freddy, from Guatemala, works in a dairy in Idaho. Ayan, as a teenager, escaped war-torn Somalia, a human trafficker, and abusive factory work in Georgia before arriving in Washington, where she works at a cell phone carrier and saves money to go to school. Jesus risked his life crossing the desert to come here from his “lovely and beloved Mexico” to work in Oregon tending caneberries. These are a few of the immigrants interviewed for this report. They represent the diversity of immigrants in the Northwest today. Census data provides a broader view of immigration to the Northwest, but there are some limitations. The census undercounts immigrants, and particularly undocumented immigrants, by as much as 10 percent.<sup>1</sup> This information is now five years old, and the number of immigrants in the region will have changed in that time. Nonetheless, this data provides some sense of the diversity of immigrants to the region and the size of the population.

### IDAHO

According to the 2000 Census, five percent of Idahoans were born outside of the United States to parents who were not citizens of the United States. Nine percent of Idahoans speak a language other than English at home, and seven percent of Idahoans speak Spanish at home. There are 21,000 naturalized citizens in Idaho and almost 43,000 immigrants who are not citizens. Sixty percent of immigrants to Idaho come from Latin America. Nineteen percent of immigrants to Idaho originated in Europe, while 13 percent were born



in Asia.<sup>2</sup>

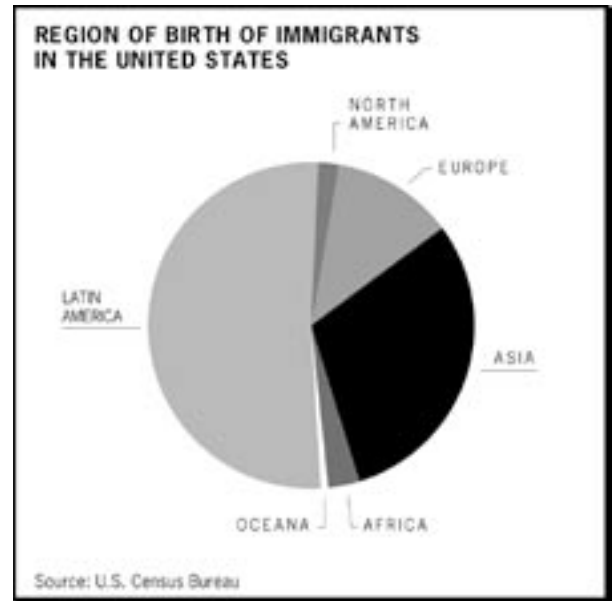
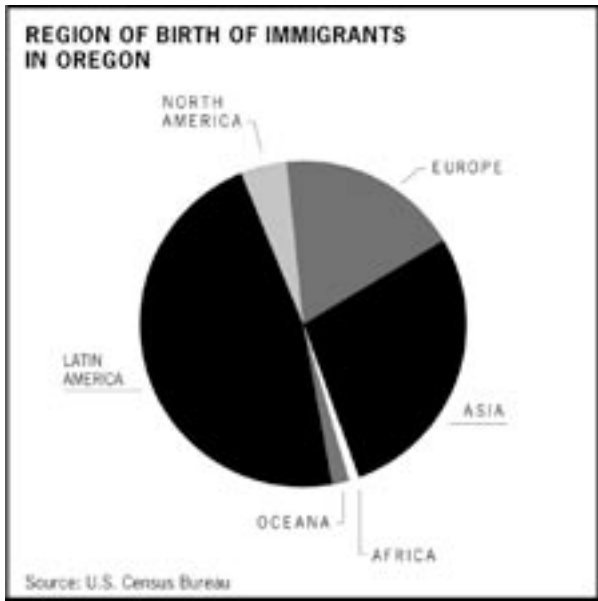
### WASHINGTON

Ten percent of Washingtonians were born outside of the United States to parents who were not citizens of the United States. Fourteen percent of Washingtonians speak a language other than English at home. The most common languages other than English spoken at home are Spanish (six percent of Washingtonians) and Asian and Pacific Island languages (4.4 percent of Washingtonians). There are 258,000 naturalized citizens living in Washington, and 357,000 immigrants who are not citizens. Thirty-nine percent of immigrants to Washington were born in Asia, 28 percent in Latin America, and 20 percent in Europe.<sup>3</sup>



### OREGON

Nine percent of Oregonians were born outside of the United States to parents who were not citizens of the United States. Twelve percent of Oregonians speak a language other than English at home; seven percent of Oregonians speak Spanish at home. There are 97,000 naturalized citizens in Oregon, and 192,000 immigrants who are not citizens. Forty-five percent of immigrants to Oregon were from Latin America, 27 percent were from Asia, and 19 percent originated in Europe.<sup>4</sup>



### HOW DOES IMMIGRATION TO THE NORTHWEST COMPARE TO IMMIGRATION NATIONALLY?

All three of the states profiled in this report have lower rates of immigration than does the nation on average: 11 percent of U.S. residents were born outside the United States to parents who were not U.S. citizens, while five, nine, and 10 percent of Idahoans, Oregonians, and Washingtonians are immigrants, respectively. Fifty-one percent of immigrants to the United States were born in Latin America; 26 percent of immigrants were born in Asia, and 15 percent of immigrants to the U.S. were born in Europe. Eighteen percent of U.S. residents speak a language other than English at home, and 11 percent speak Spanish at home.<sup>5</sup>

Immigrants to the United States have traditionally lived in a few “gateway” areas, like New York City and Los Angeles. Sixty-seven percent of immigrants to the United States still live in six of these traditional gateway states, California, New York, Texas, Florida, New Jersey, and Illinois. In recent decades, however, more immigrants have been moving into other regions of the country.<sup>6</sup> Oregon,<sup>7</sup> Idaho, and Washington<sup>8</sup> are three states that have growing immigrant populations of immigrants. Seattle and Portland, immigrant gateway cities at the turn of the last century, are re-emerging as immigrant gateway cities.<sup>9</sup>

## CHAPTER 2

# CROSSING THE BORDER

Every year, hundreds of thousands of people cross the border between Mexico and the United States without documentation.<sup>10</sup> Most immigrants who cross that border are Mexican, but immigrants from other countries in Latin America, and from as far away as China and Eritrea, also travel to Mexico to try to cross the border there. In 2005, over 150,000 immigrants from countries other than Mexico were arrested trying to cross the border between Mexico and the United States.<sup>11</sup> Trying to cross the border since tighter border enforcement measures have been implemented can be fatal. In one year, from October 2004 to September 2005, a record 460 people died trying to cross the border between the United States and Mexico.<sup>12</sup> But immigrants continue to brave the border, pushed to migrate by pressures in their countries of origin or the desire to be reunited with family in the United States.

### WHY PEOPLE CROSS

Despite the increasing dangers, the pressures that drive people to leave their homes and travel to another country continue to push people across the borders. The most common reason interviewees gave for moving to the United States was economic: they were unable to find work in their countries of origin, or the work they were able to find did not pay enough to support their families.

I used to work for the government in Mexico, where I earned very little. There wasn't enough money for me to put food on the table. My daughters were going to school and I couldn't take care of them. That's why I came to the United States, to try to find more opportunities.

*Julio, Oregon*<sup>13</sup>

My wife is having health problems and I could not earn enough building houses in Mexico to pay for her care. Unless her health gets worse I think I will stay another year, because I should be able to make enough to get us back on our feet. If I left now I would just break even because the coyote [a guide people hire to help them cross the border between the U.S. and Mexico] charged me \$1,200 to cross.

*Faustino, 38, Idaho*

Economic pressure to migrate, historically a primary cause of immigration to the United States, is complex. Studies have shown that America's higher wage is "neither necessary nor sufficient for international migration to occur."<sup>14</sup> With the exception of a few refugees, immigrants do not come from the poorest and least developed countries, but from nations whose economies are growing rapidly as a result of their incorporation into global trading networks.<sup>15</sup> A newly

developing market economy can result in job displacement and can leave banking and insurance industries unstable.<sup>16</sup> In such an unstable economy, having some household members work in different labor markets, both domestic and foreign, can help a family survive.<sup>17</sup>

I came without papers and I am an immigrant who came risking my own life. Six years ago I lost a daughter in the desert in Arizona trying to cross the border. And even though it is very difficult, the cursed misery makes you leave your town. When you leave your house you ask God for everything to all right, to be able to arrive in the North, to be able to work, and to send a little money to your family.

*Javier, 57, Oregon*

Other immigrants report that they left their countries of origin to escape war, religious or political persecution.

The war in Kosovo came to our house on March 3, 1999. Serbian soldiers were attacking Albanian people. That day, the soldiers came and made us leave our home so they could burn it down. They said that we could stay in the house if we wanted – they would be happy to burn it down with us in it. A few soldiers picked up my daughter, who was three, and said that she would make a good football, and they should play with her. I didn't dare look back as we walked away. We lived in the woods nearby for a while, and then walked for 24 hours to Macedonia. At the border, the Serbian soldiers beat my husband and my stepson and tried to take the few things we had left. They beat my stepson so badly that I thought he was dead. We came to the United States when a church sponsored us as refugees. The people in the camp told us that we might be able to get better care for my stepson here than in the camp there.

*Sedije, Washington*

I moved here from Honduras because of the war – I didn't want to get involved in the military. Now there is violence in Honduras for different reasons – people who moved up here to escape the war got involved in gangs and were deported back so now they're taking the gang violence to Honduras with them. It's destroying the country.

*Eduardo, 35, Washington*

Others reported that they fled violence or crime.

I left Mexico because my father and husband were killed by a gang. They shot them. I still had other family there but I left right away with my children.

*Evilia, 33, Idaho*

Finally, many reported that they came to the United States





*In one year, from October 2004 to September 2005, a record 460 people died trying to cross the border between the United States and Mexico.*

Courtesy of Mikeal Wiley, Border Action Network

to be reunited with family members who were living here. I came because I was recently married and my husband, even though he was from the same town as me in Mexico, had spent a lot of time living here. More than anything I came to be with him. *Juana, 23, Washington*

### **A PERILOUS CROSSING**

Crossing the desert is dangerous without proper supplies, and many migrants do not know what they need to take. Many of the stories interviewees told related these experiences.

One of the hardest things...is actually coming to this country. It's really hard to cross the border, risking your life. I remember one time when we didn't have water for three days. *Anastasia, 44, Idaho*

As the United States focuses on enforcement of borders, entering the United States has become more difficult, and more dangerous. The Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA), increased enforcement efforts on the



Courtesy of Claudio Beagarie

southern border of the United States.<sup>18</sup> These enforcement efforts more than doubled the number of border agents between 1993 and 1997, increased the use of technology and fencing in border enforcement, and increased spending in general on enforcement by many times.<sup>19</sup> These enforcement efforts focused on urban areas that were common crossing areas.

As a result, people crossing the border were forced to attempt to cross in more rural, and much more dangerous, areas including desert and mountain regions.<sup>20</sup> While no official records of deaths at the border by migrants are kept, deaths at the border increased as this enforcement policy was implemented.<sup>21</sup>

I walked through the desert. I spent seven days walking with a group of twenty people. I was cold, thirsty, hungry, and afraid. I was afraid I would never see my daughter again, that I would not be able to fulfill my dream. I saw snakes and dead bodies of people who were left there in the desert. *Ventura, 35, Idaho*

The causes of death changed as well, with the number of people dying of exposure to environmental heat, cold and dehydration increasing from 33 in 1985 to 99 in 2000.<sup>22</sup> Over half of the people who died crossing the border in 2005, or 261 people, died trying to cross the desert in Arizona.<sup>23</sup>

We had no passports and crossed the border walking. It took one month—it was really hard to cross because of all the immigration officers watching. We weren't detained by officials but we were robbed at the border; someone took our money and assaulted us. My parents (already in the US) sent me money, so that I could try again but then my one month old daughter got really sick and I thought she would die. I called my mom and said I don't want to go to the U.S., I want to go home. But my parents said "You can't, we don't have any more money for you to try again another time. You have to come now." *Guadalupe, 24, Idaho*

We had to try seven times before we got through and we were running out of money and water. Once you try to cross and you don't make it, you can't just go back to your house and say well, I'll try again later. Our home was far away, so we had to live in the street near the border and keep trying with different people until we made it. Once we got caught at the border. They put us in a tank and threw food and water at us. But the good thing was that they treated

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**I was cold, thirsty, hungry, and afraid. I was afraid I would never see my daughter again.**

*Ventura*

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the women better. My sister was one of the women and I don't think I would like to see her go though what we went through. *Javier, 40, Idaho*

## **EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE**

While most people rely on guides (coyotes), having a guide is no guarantee of safety.

I saw a lot of mistreatment by the coyotes. After crossing the border, I was kept under armed guard in a house with about 150 other people. Some of the women in the room were sick, and they gave us very little food. They harassed the women and they had large firearms. They prevented us from looking out the windows to see where we were – if you did they would hit you with the butt of the rifle. They wouldn't let us talk with each other, just with them. People were constantly being moved in and out – they would move ten or twenty people at a time – depending on when they got payment from family members already here, who would wire money to them through Western Union in order to have family released. Once my brother paid, they took me to Atlanta and then got me a bus ticket to Florida. *Enrique, 47, Washington*

Another consequence of the tighter controls is that the "coyotes" people hire to guide them across the border are becoming more violent and desperate.<sup>24</sup> Migrants are robbed and raped by guides.<sup>25</sup> Some groups still get lost or are abandoned by the coyotes they hired to guide them.

I walked through the desert for about 13 hours. There were 28 or 30 people with us. After 10 hours the food and water was gone. One girl fainted so we carried her the rest of the way. The coyote told us just to leave her, saying, "Who can, can, but who can't can't." There are too many dangers in the desert; you can get bitten by a snake or stung by a scorpion. I've heard from others that you can get jumped by gangsters and women get raped. *Josue, 36, Idaho*

When we were trying to cross the border we were very thirsty. Then the people who were helping us cross just left us there with no food or water. I really thought we were going to die. *Margarita, 21, Idaho*

Coyotes are charging more and more as the trip becomes more difficult. Immigrants reported paying coyotes from \$1,000 to \$2,000 per person.

I came first, across the desert. I was with five people and the coyote. We walked for three days and nights, and for the first two days we had food and water. When it ran out one of my companions became so dehydrated that she was dying. The coyote left us without food or water and said he would be back in half an hour. He was gone almost an entire day, so another man and I went to look for food and wa-

ter. We found help in a town nearby. A man helped us, gave us a place to stay and food, and helped us get to California. My wife and children walked five hours with no trouble but the heat. We paid about \$14,000 for the whole family. *Emiliano, 33, Idaho*

While some people reported that border guards and other law enforcement officials helped them when they were lost in the desert and showed them kindness, others reported that officials were pointlessly cruel to them.

I walked through the desert for seven days with friends and my brother-in-law. We thought we knew the way so we didn't pay a coyote. In three days we ate only once because we had limited food and water. People sold us food and water until we ran out of money. The heat was infernal and we thought we were dying. Immigration passed us, patrols and people in cars, and we asked them to send us back but they wouldn't. One of the immigration police told us, "You got yourselves in, now keep on going." Since nobody would help us we kept on walking. Thank God, we were lucky. *Antonio, 31, Idaho*

The coyote told us it would take five hours to walk across the border. It actually took three days. We did not have enough water or food with us, and we thought we would die of thirst. You can't explain an experience like that in words. When we were caught, the official drank water and ate half a banana in front of us, then threw away the rest to torture us. *Hector, 35, Washington*

Many immigrants from countries that do not border the United States also enter the country illegally with the help of smugglers, and they face similar dangers.

My family was very poor in Somalia after the war broke out. My mother worked as a housekeeper for European families, and one of the families agreed to sponsor me to go to the U.S.. My mom chose me to go because I am the eldest and I spoke some English. The man I left with took me first to a country in Europe for what seemed to be a year. I still do not know where I was. I think we traveled from there to a country north or south of the U.S., because we crossed a border. Then he brought me to a house in the U.S.. I met other African girls who lived there and told me that he was trafficking them. He treated all of us with respect when we obeyed him, and got violent when we did not. Luckily I met a Somali woman who helped me get away. *Ayan, 20, Washington*

## UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

There is little evidence that the increased border enforcement beginning in the 1990's reduced the number of people crossing into the United States, although there is some evidence that it has encouraged people who had crossed into

the United States to lengthen their stay in the United States and delay return trips across the border. Before increased border patrol, 95 percent of Mexican migrants returned to Mexico within five years and the average trip length was 1.7 years. By 2004, only 76 percent had returned to Mexico within five years, and the average trip duration had grown to 3.5 years.<sup>27</sup>

I came through the desert the first time ten years ago and it wasn't as dangerous then as it is now. I went back last December to see my parents and my son and it was hell trying to cross back. I won't do that again unless there is an emergency. Some people don't make it across and there are some that are left out there in the desert and they don't even get a decent funeral. *Alejandro, 27, Idaho*

Almost every one of the people interviewed reported that they had family members remaining in their country of origin. Many reported that they had chosen not to travel to their countries of origin or delayed trips because they did not want to face the hazards of returning to the United States.

I first came to the United States eight years ago. My son was with me for a while but he didn't like it, so he went back to live with my family. Now he thinks of my parents and sister as his parents. If you have a child you can imagine how painful that is for me, and how hard it is to live without him. He is graduating from high school and I have decided that I have to be at his graduation. Now my father is really sick. I know that this will probably be the last time I see him alive. I am undocumented, so when I come back I will have to spend thousands of dollars to hire a coyote to help me cross illegally. The first time I came with my son we got caught and sent back. The second time we got lucky. Last time I came back the coyote made us wait for a long time in a small apartment with no ventilation. It was terrible – you can't sleep, you can't eat, you can't rest because you are too afraid, and you don't know how long you will have to wait or what will happen. I would like to bring my son back with me, but I do not want to put him in danger again. *Adriana, Washington*

Finally, recent attempts by civilian volunteers to patrol and monitor the border are forcing migrants to take more dangerous routes.<sup>28</sup>

I came walking through the desert for four days. Making the journey isn't easy, and even worse now that there are Minutemen at the border. I can't visit my family in Oaxaca, Mexico, because of it, and that truth is very hard. *Hugo, 25, Oregon*



Courtesy of Leo Morales

## CONCLUSION

The same experiences, of physical danger and fear when crossing the border, were related by many of the immigrants interviewed. Together, the interviews showed that:

- It is extremely expensive and dangerous to try to enter the country without documents, and often fatal.
- Despite the dangers, people will continue to attempt to enter the United States without documentation for compelling political, economic, and personal reasons.
- The immigration system, which relies on the enforcement of the borders to exclude immigrants without documents rather than providing ways for immigrants to obtain legal immigration status, has created a human rights crisis at the borders.



Courtesy of Claudio Beagarie

# THE NARROW PATH TO CITIZENSHIP

There are almost as many undocumented immigrants as legal permanent residents living in the United States (10.3 million and 10.4 million, respectively).<sup>29</sup> Some people assume that all undocumented immigrants are Latino and enter the United States without papers. This is not accurate. While a majority (8.4 million) of undocumented immigrants are from Latin America, there are millions of undocumented immigrants from other regions of the world. One million undocumented immigrants are from Asia, .6 million undocumented immigrants are from Europe, and .4 million undocumented immigrants are from Africa and other regions.<sup>30</sup> And while many undocumented immigrants arrived in the United States without status, many others arrived with visas but have stayed longer than their visas authorized, or lost their status for other reasons.

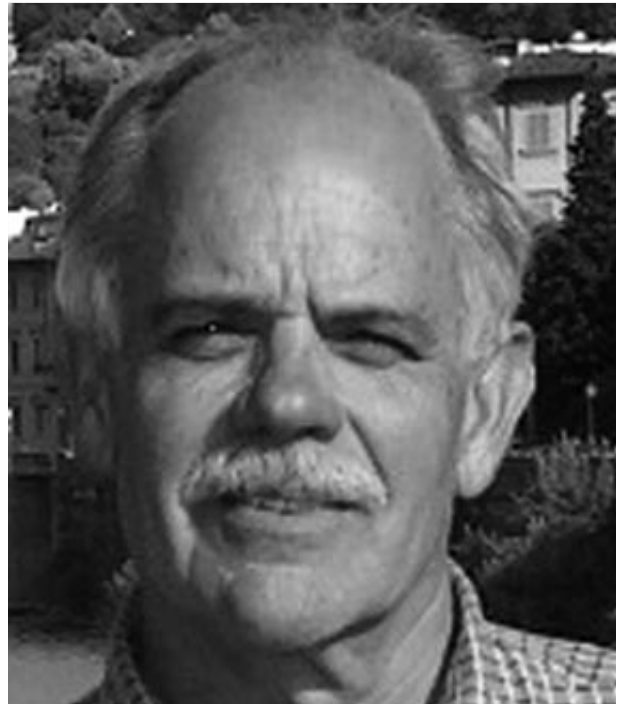
There are many reasons why people live in the United States without papers. Some people have difficulty obtaining or keeping legal status because of the lengthy, confusing, and expensive process. Family members applying for family reunification visas may wait decades before getting permission to enter the country, and choose to live with family here without status rather than remain separated. And many of the people who enter or remain in the country without documents are people who do not qualify for any category of visa. For them, no amount of money, paperwork, or waiting would result in legal immigration status. The only way they can live in the United States is without documents.

## MANY PEOPLE CANNOT QUALIFY FOR ANY TYPE OF VISA

Immigrants in the Northwest report that they experience significant barriers to obtaining legal status in the United States.

We can't get permanent residence because we don't qualify for it. There's no one to petition for us. We're here to work, and we do the work that the others won't do. But we can't get a visa to do it. *Martha, Washington*

Many do not qualify for any category of visa. Immigrant visas, which place recipients on the path to citizenship, are generally limited to people who have an employer or relative who is eligible to petition for them. There are some other categories of people who can apply to immigrate, such as asylees, refugees, priority workers (including outstanding professors and certain multinational executives), and diversity immigrants chosen by a lottery from countries with low rates of immigration. Nonimmigrant visas are available for foreign nationals entering the U.S. temporarily for a specific



*One of the primary priorities for refugee resettlement is reunifying families. It works in many cases but not in all, and it is ironic that some refugees are frustrated in their attempts to bring their families together.*

Jan Reeves, Director, Idaho Office for Refugees, Boise, Idaho

purpose, like business, tourism, temporary work, or study.<sup>32</sup> Most of the immigrants interviewed for this report do not qualify in any of these categories.

I've asked an attorney how we might be able to get green cards, but we just don't qualify. In the meantime, I'm taking English and computer classes and I plan on taking my GED. When the season gets going, it's hard to be in class, but I try to practice my English as much as I can. Someday, I would really like to work in a school as an interpreter and teacher's assistant or in a hospital taking care of older people. There should be an option for people to be able

to get papers. I am a mother, I'm working, I'm paying my taxes, which are deducted from my paycheck, just like with everyone else. *Ana, 37, Washington*

I am from San Luis Potosi, Mexico. In Mexico, I managed to get my bachelor's degree in Economics. With my studies I was able to obtain a job as a consultant. But even after five years of education my salary was very low. I wanted to enter the United States legally to be with my father and siblings who had been here for several years. My dad, who was a legal permanent resident of the United States, applied for papers for me in 1994. Unfortunately, my father passed away in 1996 due to a serious head injury. My inability to get a visa kept me from seeing my father before his death. Not only did I lose my father, but my hopes and dreams for entering the U.S. legally were shattered. My application became invalid the minute my father passed away, even though my paper work was submitted well before my father's death. I was left with no way to be with my family again except to enter the U.S. illegally. *Antonio, Idaho*

## **BACKLOGS FOR FAMILY REUNIFICATION VISAS SEPARATE FAMILIES FOR DECADES**

Some immigrants live here without papers because they do not want to be separated from family members for extended, or indefinite, periods of time. While legal permanent residents and citizens can petition for visas for close relatives, backlogs in the visa process separate families for years, and sometimes decades. The number of immigration benefits applications pending has risen 1000 percent since 1990.<sup>33</sup>

My family is scattered all over the world. When the war broke out in Somalia people were trying desperately to get out of the country. My family and I traveled to Kenya and from there we were sponsored one by one to different countries. I have family in the U.K., Australia, Switzerland, Denmark, Holland, Somalia, and Kenya. I have tried to bring my son here from Denmark, where he lives alone, but I haven't been able to, and sometimes I feel I have failed him as a parent. I had no choice but to send him away from Kenya when he had the chance because it was too dangerous for him to stay. They tried to recruit young boys to the army and they killed his father for not wanting to join the corrupt army of the warlords. If he were younger, they say I would have a better chance of bringing him to the United States, but he is now 22 years old. *Sabra, 74, Washington*

An average of 12 years passes from the time an immigrant enters the United States to the time he can sponsor a relative.<sup>34</sup> Obtaining a visa number for a relative is a long, slow process due to naturalization, quota, and administrative backlogs. Quota backlogs occur because each category of relative is allotted a limited number of visas every year. Because there are so many people wishing to be reunited with family members, the number of applicants is larger than

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**I have tried to bring my son here from Denmark where he lives alone, but I haven't been able to, and sometimes I feel I have failed him as a parent. If he were younger, they say I would have a better chance of bringing him to the United States.** *Sabra*

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the quota, and people have to wait in long paper lines. Administrative backlogs occur because of understaffing at the Department.

I applied for legal permanent resident status in 2001, but I haven't heard anything yet. My husband would like to become a citizen, but he can't find classes. Yakima Valley Community College stopped offering citizenship classes. If he could become a citizen, it would make it easier for me to get residency. Many people have to wait a long time to get their residency or citizenship. *Angelica, 26, Washington*

A legal permanent resident must wait at least four years to sponsor a spouse or child and almost ten years to sponsor unmarried adult children because of quota backlogs.<sup>35</sup>

My husband lives in Australia. I have tried to get him a visa to move here for three years, since I arrived. The process of getting a visa for someone else is very slow and difficult. I am not a citizen myself so there is a long waiting list, and they need lots of documents. I have been back and forth so many times, filled out so many papers, given them so many documents. It is too much of a headache. I think that I will give up and move to Australia. *Wardo, 33, Washington*

My husband is getting papers for me. We submitted the application three years ago, and we will have to wait five or six more years. I know many people who have had to wait like that. Being undocumented affects me when employers don't pay me for my work. *Lizbeth, 25, Oregon*

There is no quota backlog for naturalized citizens sponsoring parents, spouses and minor children but there is an administrative backlog of several months, not to mention a backlog of one to two years to even become a U.S. citizen.<sup>36</sup>

I have been waiting for four years for my papers. I think it has been so long because the process for a legal resident to petition for a spouse is more extended than the wait for the spouse of a citizen. The waiting list is like six to eight years. That is why my husband worked to get his citizenship to speed up the process. He got it a year ago. They said that now it will still be one to two years. *Juana, 23, Washington*  
The wait for citizens to receive visas for non-immediate relatives ranges from four years in the case of unmarried adult

children to twelve years for brothers and sisters.<sup>37</sup>

I have papers to live in Canada, but the rest of my family has papers to live in the United States. After my divorce I was very lonely, and I am raising my children alone now, so it is hard for me to be separated from my mother and my brothers who live in Seattle. I feel more at home in Vancouver, B.C., where I have been living and where I can work, but if we lived in Seattle my family could help with my children. I have been traveling back and forth to visit them and trying to get a visa to live and work in the US. Some people say I should marry a citizen, but I don't want to do that. I am trying to save money for a lawyer to help me get a visa. *Ubx, 32, Washington*

Interviewees explained how the backlogs affect their lives.

I live with my 27 year-old daughter and her seven year-old son. In 1997, I submitted an application for her to get her green card. Recently I went to the immigration office to ask about her application and they told me it would still take five years for it to come through. *Eduwiges, 61, Washington*

Some interviewees were unable to sponsor family members because they were not legal permanent residents or citizens. Undocumented immigrants and some immigrants with legal status are not allowed to petition for visas for family members at all.

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**I filed the papers in 1994 and still haven't gotten an appointment. I don't know how much longer I will have to wait.** *Francisco*

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I haven't seen my parents in 12 years. It's really hard as a girl because you need your mom. But after a while you get used to it because there's no other way. You just have to call them, but it's hard because you don't really know them. You don't know what they do, what they like and don't like. You can't get much information over the phone. My brothers are like my parents now. I'd like to visit my parents but it's too hard to come back, and we can't get a visa for my mother to come here. *Cristina, 17, Washington*

## **RED TAPE AND EXPENSES PREVENT IMMIGRANTS FROM GETTING LEGAL STATUS**

Some immigrants have difficulty completing the paperwork or paying the fees, or have hired lawyers or other advocates to assist them without success.

I am a legal permanent resident and I am getting papers for my wife and children. The paperwork has been a long and complicated process. I filed the papers in 1994 and still



*With the current unavailability of visas, a legal resident alien can expect to wait anywhere from five to eight years bring his spouse and minor children to the U.S. from Mexico. A U.S. citizen can expect to wait at least a year before they can get their spouse to the U.S. just because the internal processing is so delayed. Nobody I have ever talked to thinks this is reasonable — because it's not.*

Maria Andrade, Attorney, Boise, Idaho

Courtesy of ICAN

haven't gotten an appointment. I don't know how much longer I will have to wait. *Francisco, 53, Oregon*

Some advocates take advantage of immigrants and charge exorbitant fees. Unqualified practitioners can harm an immigrant's chances of getting status by making mistakes in

the application process.

I've been waiting since April 1992 for my green card. My parents paid someone \$1,300 dollars to prepare the paperwork for me. In my opinion, she did the worst job. *Pancrecio, 31, Oregon*

For immigrants who are new to a community and do not speak English, it is difficult to find a qualified attorney and pay the legal fees for help navigating the system.

Well, all of the immigration fees are so expensive. They have gone up a lot in five years. We don't really have a choice, we need our papers so they can charge what ever they want and we have to pay. There are so many costs: for a lawyer, a notary, all the applications. And if you don't pay it all, they can close your case. I think that they take advantage of people's need. But to have papers would mean that you don't have to always live in fear that they're going to come and throw you out of the country. So, if they tell you \$2,000 you say, "Okay \$2,000." Immigration raised all the fees a lot. Supposedly it was to hire more people so they would process your application quicker, but it's the same: people waiting year after year after year...And there are a lot of people who really want to get their papers in order but they can't. They don't have any one to petition for them. *Juana, 23, Washington*

I applied for papers but after waiting six years I gave up. I got a lawyer to help but he never did anything. *Alicia, 38, Idaho*

### **COMPLEXITIES IN IMMIGRATION LAW MAKE IT DIFFICULT TO RETAIN LEGAL STATUS**

Sometimes the complexity of the law makes it difficult for people who do have status to retain that status. Immigrants do not always understand what the law means for them, how to keep their status, how they can lose it, and how to move on to more permanent status. This uncertainty about immigration status creates problems in other areas of immigrants' lives, and allows small misunderstandings to create permanent barriers to citizenship.

I came to the U.S. to survive. There was so much fighting in Somalia and the U.S. Government sponsored me as a refugee. When I had refugee status five years ago, I was caught chewing "khat," which is a leaf-like substance that East Africans chew. It is an acceptable cultural practice in Somalia. I did not know that it was illegal to chew it here, and I would not have done it if I had known. I got arrested and a judge sentenced me to three years of probation and took away my refugee status. Now I am unable to gain legal immigration status and I am stuck here, living in fear that any day they will come and take me away from my children. Seven months after I was sentenced, the INS came to my house early in the morning, while I was still sleeping, ar-



*The immigration system is very complex and it is hard for a non-lawyer to do things like fill out applications, write briefs, and appear before judges. Unlike the criminal courts, however, there is no public defender system, so immigrants who cannot afford a lawyer generally have to make their own way through the system.*

Matt Adams, Northwest Immigrant Rights Project, Litigation Unit Staff Attorney, Seattle, Washington

rested me, and put me back in detention. They said, "We are immigration officials, we are here because you committed a crime, and we got a warrant from the court." *Hassan, 29, Washington*

I am a United States citizen. I met my wife Claudia in 1999 when I was visiting family in Mexico, and we got married in August 2000. Shortly after we got married, I filed a visa petition for Claudia. After the petition was approved, Claudia's case was sent to the U.S. Embassy in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, for her green card interview. During the interview, my wife told the officer that she had previously entered the United States in 2000. The officer asked for more specifics about how my wife entered. Claudia said that the coyote told her to tell the immigration officials that she was a United States citizen. However, she told the officer that when she got to the border, she did not have to



say anything because the border patrol officer allowed her to enter the country without presenting any documentation or answering any questions. The officer at the Embassy misunderstood my wife, and wrote in her notes that my wife had told the officer at the border that she was a United States citizen. The officer then told us that my wife was not eligible for a visa. Claudia and I tried to correct the officer to clarify that Claudia did not say anything false to the border patrol officer, but she did not allow us to correct her. The Embassy denied Claudia's visa. After that interview, I met with an immigration lawyer. The lawyer explained to me that people who falsely claim to be United States citizens are not eligible to become permanent residents. There is no exception to this rule, even if they are married to a United States citizen, like Claudia is. The lawyer also told me that, even though the officer misunderstood what Claudia told him, there is no way to appeal the officer's decision in the United States courts. *Luis, Washington*<sup>38</sup>

## **CONCLUSION**

The immigration system does not provide a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants living and working in the United States today. For immigrants with legal status, as well as immigrants without legal status, the complexity of the immigration system makes it difficult to comply with the law. Families are separated for years or decades because of backlogs and red tape. As our interviews illustrate:

- Because of tight restrictions on immigrant visa eligibility, millions of people in the United States are without legal immigration status and have no prospect for getting legal status.
- The complexity of the immigration law creates a paperwork nightmare for immigrants and makes immigrants vulnerable to exploitation by advocates, employers, and others.
- Undocumented immigrants are eager for the opportunity to gain immigration status and remain undocumented because they have no other choice.

## CHAPTER 4

# EMPLOYMENT DISCRIMINATION AND EXPLOITATION

The most common reason immigrants come to the United States is to build a better life for themselves and their families. However, immigrants without legal status uniformly experienced problems in the workplace. They reported that they were forced to accept low-paying jobs without benefits because those are the only jobs available to people without work papers. Some immigrants reported that conditions in their workplaces were unsafe, and that their only choice when faced with these conditions was to endure them or quit. Some immigrants described harassment and discrimination on the job, which they were forced to ignore or leave the job. Finally, many workers in low-paying menial jobs reported that they had job skills, education, and experience in other fields that they could not take advantage of because of their immigration status.

### WAGE AND HOUR VIOLATIONS

Immigrants are over-represented among low-wage workers in the United States. While immigrants make up 11 percent of all U.S. residents, 20 percent of low-wage workers are immigrants.<sup>39</sup> Immigrants' hourly wages are lower on average, and nearly half of all immigrants earn less than 200 percent of the minimum wage.<sup>40</sup> The immigrants interviewed uniformly reported that they were only able to find work in industries that pay low wages and do not provide benefits.

The most difficult thing is not speaking English. We are practically destined for farm labor, and earning the minimum wage. If you don't have papers, it is even more difficult. They ask you for your Social Security number and if you don't have it, they don't call you for work. *Juan, 48, Oregon*

Additionally, respondents were more likely to find seasonal work, and to work in agricultural jobs that required long hours and few breaks. Other immigrants found sporadic work through day labor centers that provide a place for employers to hire workers for a day, typically doing construction or landscaping work. A recent survey of day laborers around the country found that almost half had not been

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**While immigrants make up 11 percent of all U.S. residents, 20 percent of low-wage workers are immigrants.**

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*Immigrant workers are exposed to dangers at the workplace every day. Our members are exposed to pesticides, for example, that cause long-term health problems. We need stronger worker protection laws for immigrant workers.*

Ramon Ramirez, President, Pinos Y Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste (Northwest Treeplanters and Farmworkers United), Woodburn, Oregon

paid for work they did in the two months before the survey.<sup>41</sup>

I work for people who come to a day labor center to hire people. Sometimes people don't pay us for our labor, even if they hire us through the day labor center, which is there to protect workers from being exploited. *Gustavo, 52, Washington*

In this work you get exploited. You have to work from sun to sun. You must work all day long and you don't get enough breaks. *Galo, 18, Idaho*

For documented workers, workplace safety rules, wage and other laws under the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA), organizing laws under the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA), and state worker compensation laws are supposed



Courtesy of PCUN

to apply exactly as they do for U.S. citizens. But for the millions of undocumented workers in this country, the application of these laws is uncertain and the enforcement is sporadic.

I spent some time working in a garden shop. They told me I was going to make \$12 an hour, but they only paid me \$10. I worked there for a few weeks, but I didn't complain. I just left the job. *Alexis, 19, Washington*

At the beginning, when I came to this country I was psychologically and economically abused by my employer. I worked for him for about 20 days and he didn't pay me or feed me. I was locked up for 15 days. When I asked him to release me, he promised to pay me \$50 but I never received any money. He took me to another state, and during the entire trip, his assistant had his foot on my back. *Pedro, 35, Washington*

Before I got my papers, I got a job at a local factory that shipped electronic parts. I was paid under the table and earned a third of what everyone else was making, about \$3 an hour. I worked 14 to 16 hours a day with few breaks and had to do everything the employer asked me to, which was above and beyond what my co-workers did. I was exposed to dangerous chemicals and other harmful things. I knew that other people were not being treated like I was, but I did not complain because I was afraid to upset my employer and I needed the money to pay rent. *Ayan, 20, Washington*

## WORKPLACE DANGERS

Despite labor protections, many immigrants work in

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### The ten occupations with the most Latino workers are almost three times as dangerous as the ten occupations with the most white workers.

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workplaces that are unsafe. While fatal injuries on the job dropped to 4.3 injuries for every 100,000 workers in the United States in 2000, workplace fatalities rose to 5.7 injuries for every 100,000 immigrant workers.<sup>42</sup> Immigrants are over-represented in occupations and industries with higher risks of fatality.<sup>43</sup> The ten occupations with the most Latino workers are almost three times as dangerous as the ten occupations with the most white workers.<sup>44</sup>

I recently got injured at work. A company called Addeco placed me at Nike, where I injured my back. Nobody was able to help me. I went to the Mexican Consulate and they did nothing. I got an attorney, but received very little of the money they said I would get. I couldn't complain. In fact, my lawyer said that I should be happy that Addeco paid for a chunk of the surgery because usually people would pay out of their own pockets. I haven't recovered completely because I couldn't continue with the physical therapy. *Julio, Oregon*

Latino workers have higher rates of both fatal and non-fatal injuries at work than other workers.<sup>45</sup> A national survey of day laborers found that one in five had suffered a work-related injury; more than half of those injured in the past year did not receive medical care.<sup>46</sup>

I work as a roofer. Walking around on roofs is always dan-



Courtesy of PCUN

gerous, because of the height. I got hurt once and my boss took me to the hospital. He told me I couldn't tell them I fell on the job so he wouldn't have to pay workers compensation. I haven't gotten the bill yet, and I don't know who will pay it. When workers of different races work on the same crew, Latinos always seem to get the hardest and most dangerous jobs. *Raul, 47, Washington*

My husband works on a farm, 16 hours a day, six days a week. He does all kinds of work there, and a lot of it is dangerous. He has to use chemicals in the fields and when he fixes the truck he has to change the blades and they are heavy and very sharp. He moves the irrigation lines, which is dangerous in the rain and lightening. One winter he was welding and a bit of metal got in his eye. Another time he got chemicals in his face and had to go to the hospital. He had insurance that paid for the health care, but not the time he was out of work. *Maricela, 35, Idaho*

Our interviewees reported that their worksites were often dangerous. They continued to work in unsafe conditions, they explained, because those jobs were the only jobs they could find.

We work under the sun on a beet farm, and we come into contact with a lot of chemicals. My husband developed allergies from working with chemicals on another farm, and the doctor told him not to work with chemicals anymore. He has to work,

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**Nationally, almost half of day laborers surveyed said that they had not been paid for work they did in the past two months.**

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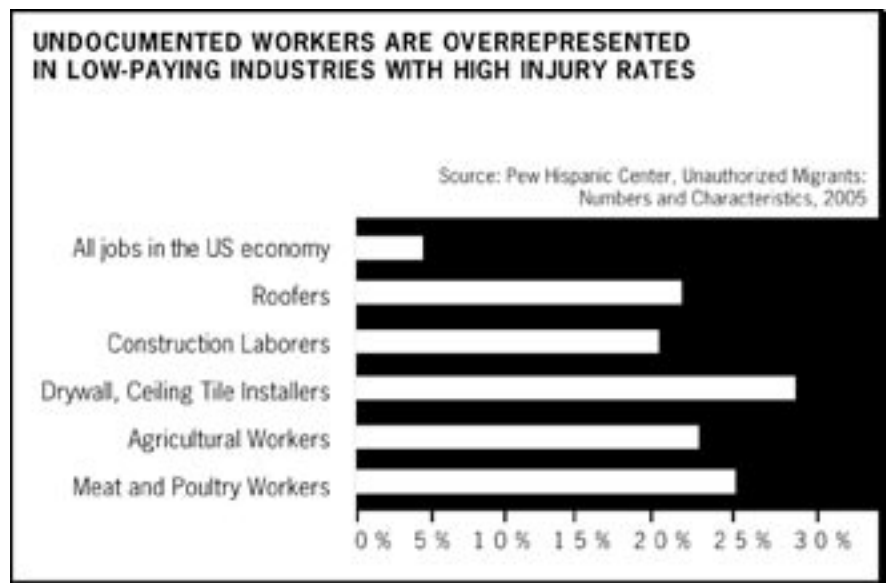
though, and he will keep doing this job.  
*Veronica, 33, Idaho*

I work in a warehouse packing fruit. I've never been injured but a lot of people get carpal tunnel syndrome or shoulder injuries. You do the same motion for 13 or 14 hours some days, and that's not good for your body. Other people are exposed to chemicals that are harmful. Our jobs are not very secure, though – none of us is indispensable – so we can't complain. *Maria, 46, Washington*

Many reported that they were afraid to complain about the conditions because they did not want to lose their jobs or risk being reported to the immigration authorities.

I have found seasonal work picking cherries, apples, nectarines. It's very hard work, and it's also very dangerous. The problem is that the ground isn't flat, so it's easy for the ladders to fall. I fell once and bruised my shoulder and back. I didn't go to the doctor because my supervisor said it was my fault and if I complained I wouldn't be able to work there anymore. *Teresa, 37, Washington*

I work in a nursery. We don't know what chemicals they use on the plants, so I do not think it is a safe place to work. They send us to work even when it is raining a lot, and they do not provide any rain gear, even if we get together and ask for it. They don't care if we get wet. But we need the work. Since we are immigrants we don't have the same rights as





Courtesy of PCUN

others who have papers. *Clara, Oregon*

Workers reported that they were exposed to hazardous pesticides when working in the fields. Federal law requires farmers to warn workers about pesticide applications, but the law is not well enforced.

I have been exposed to pesticides twice since coming here from Mexico. The first time I was working in a field when we saw an airplane passing by us, spraying pesticides. The pesticides created a cloud around us, but we didn't pay attention to it - we thought it was because of the rain. Then I started feeling symptoms: accelerated heart, tremors on my body, dizziness and vomiting. And in July of 2005, my co-workers and I were exposed to pesticides when we worked in a field that had been sprayed. No one told us about the pesticides, and there were no signs at the field to warn us. A few hours after we started work I started feeling sick. My heart was beating very fast and I felt dizzy and nauseated. A friend took me to the hospital where they made me take a shower and kept me there until afternoon. Even though it was my employer's fault for not telling us that the field was sprayed with pesticides, they don't want to pay us for the work days that we lost. But what is worst is that I've been told that I cannot work in the fields anymore because I could die if I'm exposed to pesticides again.

*Leticia, 40, Idaho*

I work in the fields in Yakima. They do not give us breaks, water, or bathrooms. Sometimes they spray pesticides in the fields next to us and the wind blows it on us. We have no protective gear. Other times they make us enter fields where the pesticides have been sprayed. *Antonio, Washington*

## WORKPLACE HARASSMENT AND DISCRIMINATION

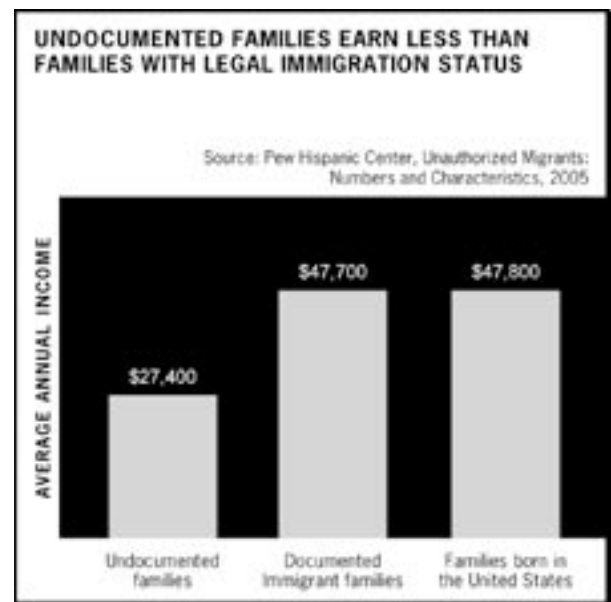
Immigrant workers are subjected to discrimination and harassment based on race, religion, country of origin, and language.

At my old job the manager always treated us as an inferior race and called us "mexicanitos." When we complained they laid us off and hired others. We reported the conditions to OSHA and they gave them a fine. We also wanted a union but they preferred to close the plant. *Antonio, 39, Oregon*

At my first job, when we lived in Georgia, I was harassed and called names. All my co-workers were white and they constantly harassed and abused me and called me names. My manager did nothing about it because he was racist, too. I don't know why I put up with it for so long. It was emotionally draining and I was suspended twice because of false accusations by my co-workers. *Abdi, 32, Washington*

Thirty-eight percent of the people interviewed said they had experienced workplace discrimination or harassment.

I used to work in a store. Because of cutbacks they reduced the cleaning service from four days a week to two. They asked the employees to help out with the cleaning. But the Latinos had to do the nasty jobs like cleaning the bathrooms, while the Anglos were just doing the dusting. I asked the manager why the difference and he said he would fix it. He took care of it, but the way he took care of it was by scheduling the Anglos to clean the bathroom on their days off, so a Latino had to do it anyway. Or he would schedule Anglos to clean the bathrooms the day after the cleaning crew had gone over them. *Blanca, Idaho*





*Undocumented workers suffer daily abuse in our region. We need to treat all workers equally, no matter when or how they came to this country. Allowing a two-tiered system of labor law protections undermines basic principles of equality and justice.*

Rebecca Smith, National Employment Law Project,  
Olympia, Washington,  
Courtesy of PCUN

For the last five years, I worked as a janitor for the same company. I have been a good employee, with no problems in all that time. A few months ago, the company began cutting back on people's hours. It's been a problem for many workers, who have complained to the union. I asked someone from the union to write a letter to the company for me. They had reduced my hours to 35 a week, and I asked them to give me eight hours a day again. A few weeks later, my boss gave me a letter saying that my Social Security number was invalid, and that I needed to correct the problem. In five years working there, they never cared about my Social Security number. Why did they decide that it was a problem when they got a letter from my union asking for more hours? As long as we cannot get papers, we cannot protect

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**At my old job the manager always treated us as an inferior race and called us "mexicanitos." When we complained they laid us off and hired others.** *Antonio*

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ourselves from employers who treat us unfairly. All I want is the right to work and get treated the same as other workers.  
*Daniel, 25, Washington*

Some workers reported disparate treatment: they were required to work longer hours, take harder or more unpleasant work, or work faster than non-immigrant workers. On the cannery processing line, they will put two Anglos to do the same work that one Latino does. *Jorge, Oregon*

Sometimes, they give me money to pay for gas but white employees get paid per mile, which is better. But I don't say anything about it because I don't want to be fired.  
*Salvador, Idaho.*

Other immigrants reported that their employers or co-workers called them names or verbally harassed them.

I've also worked in the fields, picking asparagus and working other crops. I have seen people being mistreated on the job, being cursed at and spoken to with foul language; being made to work longer hours and paid less.  
*Eduviges, Washington.*

In the past I have been sexually harassed and harassed based on my immigration status and language. I was harassed by managers, co-workers, and even clients. I did not get raises or promotions that I had earned. I complained, but nothing happened. I trained as an accountant in Mexico, but I could not find accounting work here because I had to learn English and I had no documents. *Eliana, 42, Washington*

## **RETALIATION BY EMPLOYERS AGAINST IMMIGRANT WORKERS**

Many immigrants remain in jobs because they fear losing their jobs if they complain about unsafe conditions, discrimination or harassment.

I came here from Somalia because of the war. When I worked in a warehouse here, the other employees would harass me because of my race, religion, and the fact that I spoke English with an accent. I did not report them because I have gotten fired for starting trouble before. In low paying jobs, there is no job security and people are easily replaced. I did not complain because I did not think it would make a difference. *Abdi, 23, Washington*

Many immigrants interviewed reported that they were pe-

nalized for complaining about workplace conditions, asking for unpaid wages, or otherwise asking for treatment that non-immigrant workers can consider their legal right.

I was fired because I complained about discrimination and demanded my rights. My manager tried to hurry us and I asked him why we had to work so fast. He said it was because we work by the hour and if I didn't like it I could leave. They didn't give us breaks or water. There were only two bathrooms and they were far away, and the manager would get upset when we went to the bathroom. The boss and the manager said I didn't have any right to demand my rights because I'm an illegal. I looked into suing, so the boss was going to let me work, but the manager said he would quit if I did not get fired. *Antonio, Oregon*

Others reported that their employers were aware of problems but refused to correct them.

If you complain to your boss about discrimination, the most common saying is "If you don't like it, you already know the road." *Humberto, 27, Oregon*

When I worked in a dairy, two of my co-workers were harassing me. I told the boss and he said he would rather lose one worker than two, so I could quit but he wasn't firing both of them. *Maria, 27, Idaho*

## LOSS OF SKILLS

Many immigrants, on arriving in the United States, find that they are unable to find work in their professional field.

I'm currently working as a housekeeper and an assistant at a children's center. I've only been there a month, making a little bit above the minimum wage. This job is completely different from my job in Mexico. There I used to be a medical practitioner. I'm upset that my studies are not recognized here. In Mexico I had my own practice, but here I started at the bottom of the ladder, making very little money. *Juanita, Oregon*

I studied computer science in Mexico and worked for the government there, but I can't get work here using those skills. At first I thought it was my fault that the only jobs I could get were unsafe jobs with erratic hours and low pay, but now I know that it is because of my immigration status. I do a good job and don't deserve to be yelled at, insulted, or harassed. *Pedro, 35, Washington*

Some said that the job they held in their countries of origin did not exist in the Northwest. Others found that they could not perform their chosen career here because of language barriers.

I work in a gift shop at \$5.25 an hour here. In Mexico I

finished high school and technical school, and worked as an engineering assistant at a plant. I don't have papers and my English isn't good enough, so I can't get that type of job here, even though I have the skills to do it. *Adriana, 22, Idaho*

Still others will have to go back to school or fill other requirements to be licensed here in the profession they have trained for. Some workers stay out of the workforce entirely.

I don't work here because it could interfere with my application for permanent residency. When I was in Mexico, I went to school to learn how to make clothing. We have only my husband's salary to pay our bills. I wish I could work to help out. *Angelica, Washington*

When I came here, I was looking forward to working and making a good life for myself, and also to sending money back home to my family who need it. But when I applied for jobs here, they said I was too old to work. I am in good health, better than most young people, and I was determined to work but most employers said their retirement age is 65. In Africa, men work until they physically cannot work any more. It has been hard for me to accept that I cannot work or start a business to help my family. *Sheikh Mohamud, 72, Washington*

The inability of immigrants to find work in their chosen careers here is a loss for the economy, as people with specialized skills and training are unable to use them here. It is a great loss for the individuals as well, as they generally must take much lower-paying jobs.

I volunteer helping immigrant children do well in school because I love teaching but couldn't find work. In Mexico, I worked in offices as an accountant. In order to work in this field here, I would have to study more to learn how the system works here. My English isn't good enough so I would have to learn that first. *Anita, 35, Washington*

## CONCLUSION

Immigrants experience workplace exploitation and discrimination because of their immigration status. Interviews revealed that:

- Immigrants who do not have immigration status or work authorization must take low-paying jobs with no benefits.
- Immigrants are subjected to hazardous working conditions and workplace discrimination and harassment.
- Immigrants who have education, work experience, and professional credentials in their countries of origin are often unable to obtain work in the United States that allows them to use this training and experience.

## CHAPTER 5

# HEALTH CARE, EDUCATION, AND PUBLIC BENEFITS

Immigrants, because of their status and job opportunities, are frequently closed out of the two most common sources of health insurance, employment-based insurance and public health programs. Access to care is limited for the uninsured, and language access and discrimination further limit immigrants' access to quality health care. While immigrant youth have access to primary and secondary education, federal and state barriers to college admissions, financial aid, and in-state tuition for undocumented students keep qualified students out of higher education. Immigrants do not qualify for most kinds of public benefits, and few immigrants apply for them.

### ACCESS TO HEALTH CARE

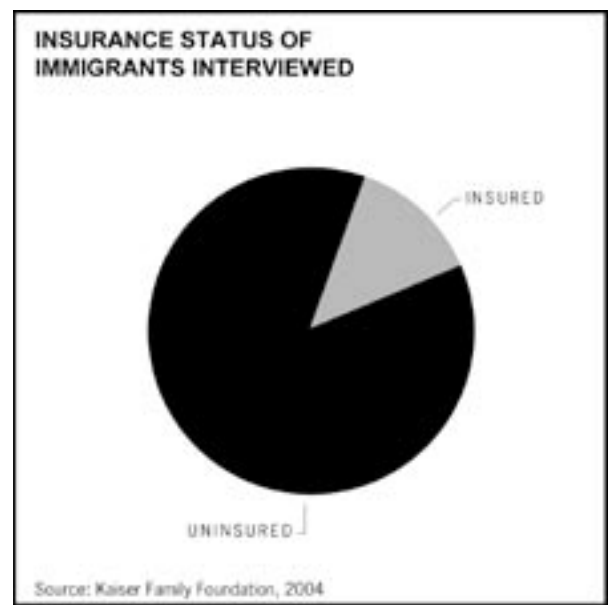
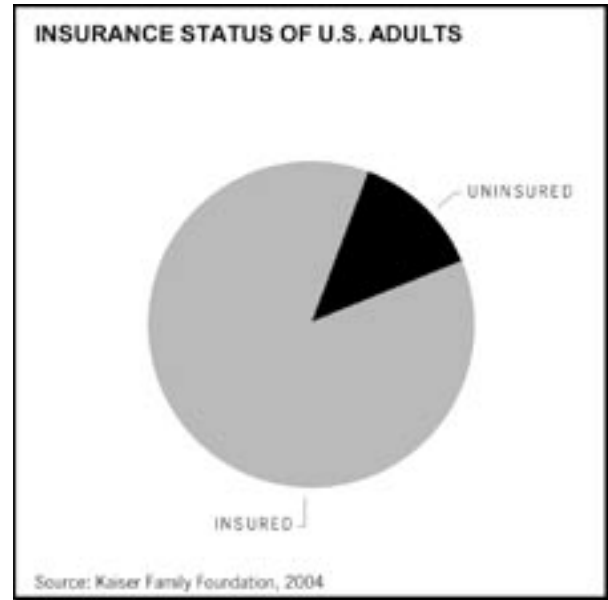
Seventy-seven percent of the immigrants interviewed were uninsured. This contrasts sharply with the national average; only 16 percent of people in the United States are uninsured.<sup>47</sup> State rates of uninsurance in the Northwest are even lower: only 17 percent of people in Oregon<sup>48</sup> and Idaho<sup>49</sup> are uninsured, and 14 percent of people in Washington<sup>50</sup> are uninsured.

There are many reasons for the high rates of uninsured immigrants. Many immigrant workers, particularly undocumented immigrant workers, are unable to find work that provides benefits like health insurance. Public programs, like Medicaid and Medicare, are closed to undocumented immigrants and many immigrants with permanent resident status. Emergency Medicaid is the only source of federally-funded public health insurance available to undocumented immigrants.

State-funded public health programs can make a difference. Washington's Basic Health Plan does not use immigration status as a requirement for enrollment.

Unfortunately, immigrants who qualify for public health programs do not always know that they are eligible. Some eligible immigrants do not apply for public health insurance programs, even when they qualify, because they are afraid that accepting any public benefits will endanger their immigration status or make them ineligible for citizenship. Low-income immigrant children who qualify for Medicaid or the Children's Health Insurance Program are only about half as likely to participate in those programs as are children who are citizens.<sup>51</sup>

Most of the people interviewed reported that they were un-



insured and had to pay for health care out-of-pocket.

I don't have health insurance, so when I was sick I went to Harborview Hospital. They billed me because I don't have insurance. I still owe them money, and they send me reminders but I can't pay it off yet. *Dahabo, 24, Washington*

Whenever we get sick we go to the Family Health Services clinic, and we pay directly. My mother became very ill only



once, and we took her to the hospital and paid out of pocket. *Adriana, 22, Idaho*

Uninsured immigrants reported that they generally avoid seeking medical care except in emergencies, because they cannot afford to pay the bills and do not want to incur bills they cannot pay. Immigrants use 55 percent less health care than U.S.-born residents, and immigrant children use 74 percent less health care than U.S.-born children.<sup>52</sup>

I do not have health insurance – only from God. If I am sick and I have to go to work, I just take a pill I buy at the Mexican store. That's how I do it. *Javier, 57, Oregon*

My husband and I pay for basic health insurance ourselves at the farmworker health clinic. We have spent many hours waiting for health care. *Rosa, Washington*

Some families have mixed insurance status, with some members insured and others uninsured.

My daughter has insurance because she was born here. When I go to the doctor I pay out of my own pocket. Since I don't have papers I don't have a right to insurance, they tell me. *Andrea, 18, Oregon*

My kids have insurance through Medicaid but I don't. When I get sick I go to the doctor and pay a lot of money. Once I was sent to collections and they took me to court. They said they were going to try to put a lien on my property. *Feliciana, 33, Idaho*

Some families reported that they encountered discriminatory behavior when applying for public health programs for their children.

My family is uninsured and we have to pay out of pocket. We are still paying bills for health problems we have had. We tried to apply for Medicaid but they kept asking for more documentation, making excuses for why we didn't qualify. They asked me for a lot of work documentation that I don't believe they ask people born here for. It's hard because I love my kids and I want them to have everything they need. *Saul, 43, Washington*

One time when we were out of work our oldest son got sick. Our neighbor told us to apply for Medicaid. When we got to the office, an employee told us that if we were undocumented we shouldn't even stay in the office. We had to ask neighbors who we didn't even know for money. The same neighbor who told us about Medicaid took us back to the office and interpreted for us so we could apply. She reported the employee who told us to leave to the case worker. Now my children have Medicaid, but we have no insurance so we go to the health clinic and pay. *Fermin and Rosa, Idaho*

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## **Immigrants use 55% less health care than U.S.-born residents, and immigrant children use 74% less health care than U.S.-born children.**

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Some people reported that their attempts to avoid accessing the health care system because they could not afford to pay for it had resulted in terrible health consequences. While federal law requires hospitals to treat any person who arrives at the hospital with an emergency health condition, regardless of ability to pay, hospitals and doctors are not required to provide follow-up non-emergency care. Uninsured people can be shut out of the non-emergency health care system entirely if they cannot show that they can pay out-of-pocket.

We don't have insurance and my daughter doesn't qualify for Medicaid because she isn't a citizen. She has heart problems. Because she doesn't have papers, they won't treat her because it's so expensive. Sometime she has chest pain but we can't do anything about it because we don't have the money. If you don't have money or papers, you have to wait until you're dying and go to the emergency room. You can't take care of your children before that. *Evilia, 33, Idaho*

Recently I found out that I have a cyst on one of my breasts. I was told that the cyst can become a malignant cancer and endanger my life. But because I have no health insurance I cannot make follow-up appointments to make sure my cyst does not become cancerous. In fact, I have called several times to try to make an appointment and my calls are not returned. How can America be a country where people value money and status more than a human life? I always thought that in America you would at least get your basic human rights met. However, it is obvious that something like health care is a human right, an American value, which is not available to all human beings. *Esperanza, Idaho*

## **DISCRIMINATION BY HEALTH CARE PROVIDERS**

Regardless of their health insurance and immigration status, immigrants related stories of discrimination and poor service by health care providers. Some immigrants reported that their health care providers did not provide adequate translation or interpretation services. Health care providers that receive federal funding, including Medicare and Medicaid payments, are required by federal law to provide interpretation services for patients who need them.<sup>53</sup> Treating patients without being able to communicate effectively is clearly not good practice. But not all health care providers have prioritized treating non-English speaking patients by providing effective language access.



*A lot of people don't know that they qualify for programs, or they don't want to apply for benefits even if they need them, because they think it will affect their chances of getting permanent immigration status. It's unbelievable how many kids, even kids with citizenship, don't have health care because of that. A lot of immigrants who are legal permanent residents and have worked here for many years do not get their social security benefits because people just do not know what benefits they qualify for.*

Jazmin Arias, Community Advocate,  
Pinos Y Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste  
(Northwest Treeplanters and Farmworkers United),  
Woodburn, Oregon

My mother had an operation on her knee. The only nurses available couldn't speak Spanish, and her family members, including me, were all working. My mother only speaks Spanish. She needed help going to the bathroom and the nurse left her, even though she asked for help. She fell because the nurse didn't help her and couldn't understand her requests. She reinjured her knee in that fall because she had just gotten out of surgery and she wasn't supposed to be walking alone. The hospital does not have enough interpreters. They have bilingual staff, but not professional interpreters. When we were there, one was a student and the other was always using a dictionary because they didn't know the words. At that hospital there is a lot of discrimination against Hispanics, and not enough services. My mother is very depressed now. Walking is extremely painful. And now she is afraid to have another operation, even though she needs one. *Lucila, Idaho*

Last year, I went to the ER because I had a pain in my stomach. I had to use a telephone interpreter because they didn't have anyone to interpret in person. I was in pain, and they made me wait there for two hours. They gave me some medicine for the pain, but it didn't go away. They told me to go to a different clinic, the next day, where they did an ultrasound and charged me over \$2,000. They never told me anything about charity care, even though I couldn't pay. I don't have much money. The hospital kept sending me bills and I pay what I can. But because they did not like what I was sending they sent me to collections. Collections called me eight months ago, and the person who called spoke Spanish. They couldn't provide an interpreter for my health care, but they could find someone to call and threaten me in Spanish. They continue to call to this day. *Natividad, Idaho*

Other immigrants interviewed reported that they and other immigrants received poor service from health care providers who appeared to discriminate against them based on their immigration status or race.

Last year I was admitted to my local hospital after getting sick from eating a hamburger from McDonald's. After four days of a bad stomach ache followed by diarrhea and vomiting, I decided to go to the hospital. After the doctor examined me, he said that I "may have" cholera and ordered that I be quarantined. I am not sure how he made this fast conclusion without doing a thorough examination. They quarantined me for six days, and during those six days nurses, doctors and other people in the hospital would make disgusted faces at me. They had signs on my door that I was to be avoided. I received very little attention, even when I told them that I was very hungry. I don't think I want to visit this hospital again. I felt very discriminated against and humiliated. *Maria, Idaho*



*Verbal communication is essential for diagnosing problems and ensuring that treatment plans and instructions are clearly understood. While many hospitals and clinics are working hard to make sure that interpretation and translation services are available, the reality is that many patients fall through the cracks.*

Allison Devers, M.D., Seattle, Washington

I have lived in Canyon County, Idaho, since 1980. I have called this community my home and I love where I live. A few years ago, I visited my local hospital because I had a miscarriage. After I arrived there, the doctor only gave me the “runaround.” He was very upset because my doctor was in a different city and he demanded to know why I came to the local hospital. He walked out of the room and I was left there alone for over an hour. Finally I unhooked myself from the various machines and walked out. I went to another hospital where they took care of me. Later someone from the local hospital called me to find out what had happened and eventually apologized for their actions.  
*Martha, Idaho*

## PUBLIC BENEFITS

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**I haven’t applied for any public benefits because I think I won’t qualify and I don’t want people to say that we take advantage of social services.** *Rebecca*

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Undocumented immigrants are ineligible for virtually all federally funded public benefits.<sup>54</sup> As a result, many of the people interviewed were ineligible for food stamps, housing assistance, and other benefits. Nationally, immigrant families are much less likely to apply for public benefits than families with parents born in the United States. A recent study showed that young children of immigrant parents were half as likely to receive food stamps or cash assistance (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) and also less likely to receive housing assistance.<sup>55</sup> One study estimated that immigrants pay an average of \$80,000 more in taxes than they will use in government services over their lifetimes.<sup>56</sup>

I have never asked for public assistance because I’ve always worked hard and tried to cover my family’s needs. *Josefina, 32, Oregon*

Seventy-five percent of the 199 interviewees who answered the question, “Have you applied for other public benefits, like food stamps, cash assistance, or disability assistance?” said that they had not. Some of the families interviewed did not apply for benefits because they did not believe they qualified. Others stated that they did not want to accept public benefits because they did not want to give people the impression that immigrants abuse public services, as is often claimed by anti-immigration groups.

I haven’t applied for any public benefits because I think I won’t qualify and I don’t want people to say that we take advantage of social services. *Rebecca, 37, Oregon*

A few immigrants interviewed reported that they had bad experiences when applying for benefits, when state workers treated them rudely because of their immigration status.

I have applied for assistance to pay the heat bill over the winter. I have also applied for food stamps. Once when I went to the office to fill out an application the person wouldn’t help. She complained and sent me to Boise instead of helping me at the office near my home.  
*Agustina, 29, Idaho*

## HIGHER EDUCATION

One reason people come to the United States is to ensure that their children have access to better education than they



Courtesy of PCUN

would in their countries of origin. Each year about 65,000 undocumented students graduate from high school in the United States.<sup>57</sup> But many of these students are unable to attend college.

In Mexico, I went to elementary school and then I moved here and continued studying. While in high school, I decided to drop out because I don't have documents to go to college and apply for financial aid. Not having documents affects me a lot because I can't get a good job. You don't have opportunities to improve your life. I cannot go to college because I have to pay more money to get in and I barely earn enough money to eat. *Salvador, 21, Idaho*

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**The hardest part about being an immigrant is that when you finish high school you can't go to college because your parents don't make enough to send you, and you can't qualify for loans or scholarships if you don't have a green card. If you have the highest GPA in your school, it's worthless.** *Pancracio*

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Most undocumented students are unable to attend college because of the significant barriers federal law has placed in their way. Federal law prevents undocumented students from receiving federally-funded financial aid, and discourages states from providing immigrant students with in-state tuition. Undocumented students have difficulty finding work to help pay for college, and immigrant parents working in low-wage jobs are unable to help.

The hardest part about being an immigrant is that when you finish high school you can't go to college because your parents don't make enough to send you, and you can't qual-

ify for loans or scholarships if you don't have a green card. If you have the highest GPA in your school, it's worthless. *Pancracio, 31, Oregon*

I work in the fields. I'm trying to save money to go to college. I get paid the minimum wage, which is \$5.15 per hour. My hardest experience is getting to college. I'd been trying to see if I can't get some kind of help so I can continue studying. *Galo, 18, Idaho*

Some state colleges and universities do not admit students who are undocumented. All of these factors keep immigrant youth from accessing higher education and the higher-paying jobs a college degree can bring.

My husband is a permanent resident and has a good job here. He got visas for me and my children to live with him until my son graduated from high school. We couldn't afford to send my son to college here because we would have to pay two or three times more than a citizen. My husband and I decided that it would be better if I went to Mexico with my son so he could go to medical school there. It was a really hard decision. I do not want to be separated from my husband, but my son is a good student and we want to give him the best opportunities. *Estela, Idaho*

I volunteer at a juvenile correction center as an internship for school. I can't get paid for it because I am undocumented. The school is letting me attend even though I don't have papers. I have been approved for a green card, but my lawyer messed up the paperwork so I haven't gotten it yet. The lawyer was really expensive and still did a bad job. I can't get financial aid because of my status, but I did get a scholarship. I don't know what I will do if I don't get my green card before my scholarship runs out. I want to go on for my bachelor's but I can't until I get my green card, and I can't work either. *Kendra, 22, Oregon*

Nine states have taken steps to ensure that undocumented children have access to higher education. These states have passed laws that allow some undocumented students to pay in-state tuition at public institutions of higher education. Only one Northwest state, Washington, has done so. Washington's law allows anyone who has finished a full senior year of high school and graduated from a Washington state high school or gotten a diploma equivalent, and lived in Washington for at least three years before graduating, to qualify for in-state tuition. The student must live in Washington between high school and college, as well as provide an affidavit saying they will file for permanent residency as soon as they are eligible.<sup>59</sup> This law, and scholarships provided by private foundations, have opened the door to higher education for many Washington students.

I graduated from high school this year, and I'm going to Central Washington University in the fall. I'm going to

study nursing. I got in-state tuition, and scholarships - one from a private group, one from the Gates Foundation. I've always known I wanted to be a nurse. My brother couldn't go to college, so he is working in construction now instead. We didn't have enough money to pay for him to go to college because that was before the law allowing undocumented students to get in-state tuition passed. I can go because I learned how to apply and get financial aid. And now that in-state tuition is available we can afford it. My brother wants to go back some day. *Maribel, 18, Washington*

I want to go to college and medical school because I want a career in medicine. I want to become a surgeon, an open heart surgeon. It will be hard to do, though. Everybody says there are as many people trying to get into medical school as there are actors trying to get into the movies. I think that being bilingual will help because they really need doctors who can speak Spanish now. *Hiram, 15, Washington*

## **CONCLUSION**

Immigrants to the Northwest are shut out of basic benefits and services that other residents take for granted, including health care and higher education. Interviews showed that:

- Very few immigrants in the Northwest have access to health insurance, and most pay for health care out-of-pocket when they cannot avoid seeking medical care.
- Immigrants seldom apply for public benefits like food stamps and cash assistance, even when they qualify for these programs.
- Undocumented immigrants are often shut out of higher education.

## CHAPTER 6

# CIVIL RIGHTS VIOLATIONS AND EXCLUSION FROM COMMUNITIES

Many people reported that they had experienced violations of their civil rights by government officials and harassment by people in public. Other immigrants reported that they had heard stories of these violations and were afraid of others in their communities. Institutional discrimination prevents immigrants from participating in basic aspects of life in the United States, like driving and living in safe housing. Immigrants' inability to obtain permanent legal immigration status fosters these problems.

### IMMIGRANTS FACE CIVIL RIGHTS VIOLATIONS BY GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS

Immigrants reported that they were treated with disrespect or discrimination by government officials, including immigration officials and police officers, because of their status as immigrants or their race.

I live in Mattawa, where in May of 2002 immigration officials and officials from the fraud division of DSHS arrived at the businesses of 47 women, almost all Latina immigrants, who took care of children in their homes. This took place during work hours, when there were children at the houses, and the men came in with papers saying that the women had to show their immigration documents and their business records – and also give information about their spouses and children – or if not, go to jail. They did not explain anything to the women that day. Later they accused the women of committing fraud and said they owed the state money. None of this was true. I had moved and they went to my old house looking for me, and I expected a visit. Since that day, we all feel humiliated when we go to the store and run errands in town. None of us were convicted of any crime – and they still have all of the papers they took that day. Two women were arrested, but were found innocent and released. Later we found out that the mayor of our town had made a complaint, alleging that we had “phantom children” in our town. It is a town with much agriculture, which benefits from many immigrant workers, and there is much demand for day care services. Later DSHS investigated and found that they had discriminated against the women, but they didn't change anything, and we never received an apology. *Elena, Washington*<sup>60</sup>

The police are very racist; they stop you for no reason. They stereotype you, saying you are a bad person because of the way you dress. *Francisco, 28, Idaho*

Three years ago a police man treated me badly. When I



Courtesy of Anne Keeney

*Since September 11, immigrants across the country—including here in the Northwest—have been subjected to an unprecedented wave of civil rights abuses. Immigrants have been detained and questioned repeatedly; immigrant businesses have been targeted unfairly by the government; and immigrants have faced discrimination in their schools, neighborhoods and workplaces. Now, even five years later, we see these violations continuing and the discussion on immigrants combined with the discussion on national security.*

Pramila Jayapal, Director,  
Hate Free Zone Washington, Seattle, Washington

asked him for help, he responded inappropriately, saying we all dress badly and are in gangs. *Monica, 41, Oregon*

Immigrants are vulnerable to this kind of discrimination for the same reasons that they are vulnerable to employment discrimination: lack of knowledge about their legal rights, difficulties in communicating, and fear of retaliation or deportation.

I go to the Home Depot to get work as a day laborer. There is a police officer who goes there and tries to stop us from getting work by scaring off employers. Once he overheard me telling a friend that the law in California and Washington says police officers can't threaten you with deportation. He told me to shut up, was I trying to cause trouble? He threatens to call Immigration and report us. *Eduardo, 35, Washington*

Other immigrants reported that they were denied access to official help or just treatment because of their status.

The hardest part of being an immigrant is that when something happens to us, [like if we don't get paid,] the police will not get involved. *Raul, 47, Washington*

Some immigrants told stories about immigration officials deporting people who had legal immigration status, assuming that they were undocumented because they were with undocumented people.

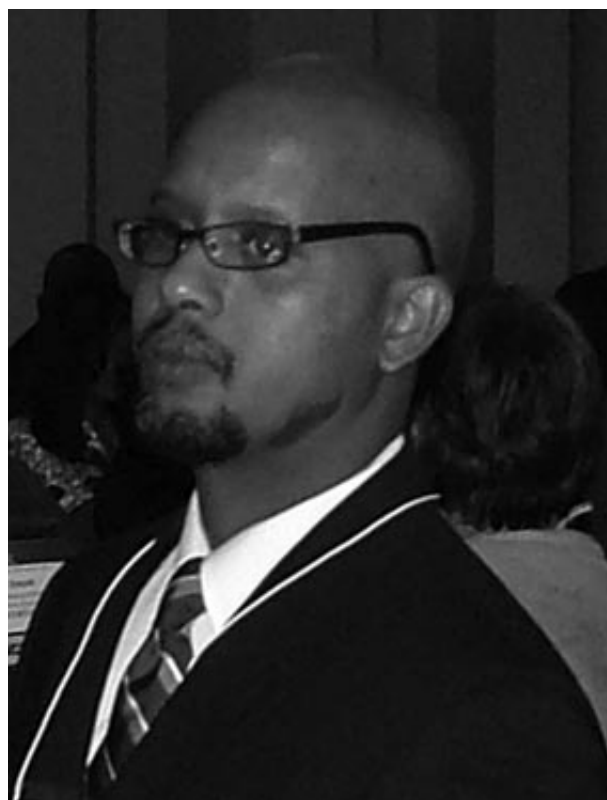
At work they started checking everyone's Social Security numbers. Once the immigration officers came to work and took everyone, even people who had a Social Security number. The reason was that everyone looked the same. *Ofelia, Idaho*

I have been reported to Immigration three or four times. There was a knock at the door, they said, "We're looking for these people," and then they took us. Once I was hiding in an attic, and once we were hiding in a basement with the rats. Another time we were in the fields and we ran, but they caught our whole family. The last time my baby was one year old, and she was an American citizen, but they put her in jail anyway and sent her to Mexico. I finally got my citizenship six years ago. *Hilda, 52, Idaho*

### **CIVIL RIGHTS VIOLATIONS HAVE INCREASED IN THE WAKE OF SEPTEMBER 11**

Some immigrants found that government officials have treated immigrants differently since September 11, presuming that immigrants are more likely to be terrorists. They described detentions and questioning by officials that was based on their nation of origin or appearance.

I am originally from Libya. I left after my government got



*The recent wave of anti-immigrant legislation started after a few highly publicized incidents in the 1990s, when people with pending asylum claims were involved in acts of terrorism. Large-scale detention of most asylum seekers became standard operating procedure, even for children. September 11th gave birth to a new era of anti-immigrant legislation. As a political asylee, I feel a familiar sense of violation – this time from the government charged with protecting me.*

Kayse Jama, Trainer/Organizer,  
Western States Center, Portland, Oregon

involved in a civil war in Chad. After I got here, I went to Pakistan for a while to see if I could find someone who could tell me how my family was. After September 11, the FBI began coming to my house and questioned me five times. They searched my house and showed me photographs of people I did not know. They asked why my name and address were all over Pakistan, and if I knew Libyan people there who were fighting to get rid of Qaddafi. I do not know anything about terrorism. I have never asked people I met if they were terrorists – I only asked them for help getting in touch with my family. When I applied for citizenship again, they told me they could not help me because the FBI had taken my file. U.S. officials have offered to help me be reunited with my wife and children if I would spy on people for them. I cannot betray people I do not know just to make my life easier. I have to live with myself, and that means I can only tell the truth. *Mansour, 39, Washington*

I lived in Kenya because of the civil war in Somalia until my wife was able to sponsor me to come here. I arrived during the high alert for terrorism, and I was held in the airport for questioning for six hours when I got off my flight. I assume it was because of my name. My wife and children were waiting for me at the airport but I had no way of letting them know I was there being questioned. They assumed I was not on the flight and went to their relatives' house. When they let me go I called the house and got no answer. I did not know anyone else. Finally, I met a fellow Somali who worked at the airport and he took me to his house. I finally got hold of my wife the next day. Even though I am happy to be here, it is difficult for Muslim people. *Abdi, 32, Washington*

Government actions after September 11 affected 60,000 people in the United States.<sup>61</sup> The government detained about 1,200 Muslim non-citizens in the September 11 investigation, and released or deported almost all of them after determining that they had no connection to terrorism.<sup>62</sup>

I have lived in the United States since July 2002. I am a political refugee from Iraq, where members of my family suffered mistreatment because of our opposition to the regime of Saddam Hussein. My brother was executed. I myself was put into prison and was tortured. Two years ago I boarded a train in Seattle to go to Washington, D.C. for a new job. The train stopped in Havre, Montana, and I got off with other passengers to stretch my legs. A Border Patrol agent, soon followed by another, came up to me and demanded to know where I was from. I said "Iraq" and showed them my immigration papers, which reflected that I am a refugee. The agents asked if I had complied with the "special registration" program. I did not know what the program was, but as a refugee I was not even subject to "special registration." The agents arrested me anyway. Various government agents questioned me and kept me in jail overnight. The next day, one of the Border Patrol agents started the paperwork to

have me deported. They claimed I should be deported for failing to comply with special registration. They made me believe that I did something wrong even though I had done nothing wrong. I was kept in the Montana jail for three nights. Officials made me strip naked, and other prisoners called me "Saddam." Then I was put in handcuffs and flown to Seattle. There, I spent five more nights in a government detention facility. I was terrified that I would be sent back to Iraq, where I would still be in great danger. I was released from jail after eight days, and finally, on May 16, 2003, the government stopped trying to deport me. But by then I had lost the job opportunity in Washington, D.C.. *Abdulameer, Washington*<sup>63</sup>

Back home in Somalia, I had to fight to live, and many of my family were killed. Here, I have to face discrimination. For example, I was detained overnight at the Canadian border. The immigration officer denied me entry to Canada because I had misdemeanors on my record, and because they said my name matched that of an extremist. I was strip searched and they called me names and harassed me. There is a red flag on my name, because every time I try to cross the border I am asked to stop in the immigration office where I am questioned extensively. And I am constantly pulled over and searched without warrants. Police think immigrants don't know their rights, and if you talk back to them they arrest

*After 9/11, the government raided Somali community grocery stores, accusing them of supporting terrorist organizations through money transfers. These allegations were completely unfounded. The FBI randomly questioned people in our community. Some people called the police and reported that their neighbors were terrorists just because they were dressed differently. We got together as a community and got support from elected officials and community organizations to protect our community.*

Mohammed Hassan,  
Senior Community Advocate, Seattle, Washington



you. There is too much racial profiling. I get mad when I am harassed by police and get arrested, but I would rather go to jail and be able to say an injustice is being done than accept the obvious racism and hatred from police towards minorities by being quiet. *Abdi, 23, Washington*<sup>64</sup>

The government actions after September 11 also affected people who had been born in the United States and naturalized citizens.

I am a 23 year-old Arab American who was born and raised in the United States. My brother, also a U.S. citizen, chose a path that landed him in trouble with the law. He has been in trouble most of his adolescent life, and been in and out of jail. Despite the fact that my brother had not lived with my family for the last four years, our home was raided in December 2003. The FBI came early in the morning with guns drawn. When I saw them enter our house, I went into the bathroom because my hair was not covered. One officer then chased after me, banged on the bathroom door, and pointed a gun at my face when I opened the door. I was not armed, not even putting up a fight. Our house was turned upside down while FBI agents searched it. Even though my brother was the only person listed on the search warrant, they searched everyone's room including my purse and school bag. I protested as they touched our Qu'ran [Holy Book] with dirty hands to shake it out – a sign of complete disrespect. They smirked and told me they could touch whatever they wanted. It was a few hours for those agents, but that raid has impacted my family forever. My little brother, then eight years old, woke up screaming in the night afraid the men with guns would come back. I was forced to miss a final exam and failed the course. I lost all I had put into that course, money, and time. It created a huge mess for me academically – I lost my tuition and had to work hard to get back into school. Our house has been under surveillance and they have continued to harass my family. The day after September 11th, we had police officers come to our house three times. Each time it was for something irrelevant. We were also targets of our neighbors' racism. Every time we had a visitor of Arabic origin over wearing traditional clothing or a beard, the neighbors would call the police. Eventually, my family and I, who are very social and always love having people over, altogether stopped seeing our friends for the fear of being visited by the local police department. *Fatma, Washington*

## PUBLIC ATTACKS ON IMMIGRANTS

As the immigration debate grows more hostile, immigrants have experienced attacks by strangers in public. These attacks are fueled by reports in the media that feed on stereotypes and myths about immigrants. The Sikh Coalition reported 216 attacks on members of the Sikh community in the three months following September 11.<sup>65</sup> The Council on American-Islamic Relations recorded 1,516 incidents,

including incidents of discrimination, harassment, and violence, against Muslims in 2001, three times as many as the year before.<sup>66</sup> These attacks continue; in 2004, there were 1,522 incidents of civil rights cases, and 141 reports of violent anti-Muslim hate crimes.<sup>67</sup> The September 11 backlash affected Asian Pacific Americans as well, with 507 incidents of hate crimes reported in 2001.<sup>68</sup>

There are a lot of ignorant people who come into the store and, when they don't get what they want, they start using bad words. Often they bring your nationality and your race into their fits of anger. I can't do anything about that. It's company policy to just ignore them. You know what they say: 'The customer is always right.' I think that the current political situation makes things harder. Immigrants are scapegoated as terrorists. Everybody who isn't white is seen as a possible suspect. So everywhere I go I have fear because people may look at me and think that I'm dangerous. People think that in this country one can do everything so long as one has the will power, but I think that is a false notion. Many immigrants possess the will power, but they can't achieve everything that people say we can achieve because not all doors are open to us. *Ruben, Oregon*

As the immigration debate has intensified, many people express anti-immigrant sentiments.

This year, I was at a local gas station when someone harassed me because he thought I looked Mexican. I was pumping gas when suddenly a man approached me sputtering that I needed to go back to Mexico and that I did not belong in

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**Everybody who isn't white is seen as a possible suspect. So everywhere I go I have fear because people may look at me and think that I'm dangerous.** *Ruben*

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Courtesy of Claudio Beagarie



Courtesy of PCUN

this country. After he made several rude comments, I told him that I was not from Mexico and that I was going to call the police for harassment. He left me alone. The whole incident terrified me. I was also upset that people who witnessed this incident chose not to intervene, but left me alone, even though I was being harassed because of the color of my skin and the perception of me being an undocumented worker. Incidents like this should not happen to anyone regardless of skin color or immigration status. *Yasmin, Idaho*

Immigrant students, including undocumented students, have access to basic education in the United States. Students experience some barriers, however, including discrimination by teachers and other students based on immigration status, race, country of origin, and language.

At the end of September, I bought my son a sweatshirt with a picture of the Virgin of Guadalupe. His teachers told him that it was against school rules and that they didn't want to see him wearing the sweatshirt anymore. They told him he couldn't wear it because it was gang clothes! They said that there was a program that would give my son clothes, and that he qualified because he is an immigrant. *Maria, Oregon*

## DRIVERS LICENSES

Idaho does not allow undocumented immigrants to obtain driver's licenses. Recent federal legislation requiring states to deny licenses to immigrants without papers may force Washington and Oregon to stop issuing driver's licenses to undocumented immigrants.<sup>69</sup> Unlicensed drivers are unable to obtain car insurance, and face strong penalties if caught

driving without a license or insurance. Immigrants in Idaho reported that the inability to get a driver's license was one of the most difficult aspects of life for them in the United States.

The hardest thing for me is not being able to get a driver's license. If you drive without one you are always scared you will be stopped by the police. But I have to go to the store to buy milk for my little son, or drive my kids to school. *Esmarelda, 21, Idaho*

My husband got deported twice. The first time, he got a ticket for driving without a license. He was driving without a license because he couldn't get one without papers. When he went to pay the ticket he was arrested and deported. I didn't have any money and

didn't know anyone, and I was afraid to go out. I went to the farm owner to get my husband's check, but he refused to give it to me. My neighbor told me to call the radio station, and the DJ asked the community to help me. Then when my husband came back he got another ticket, and that time he didn't go pay it because he was afraid of getting deported again, so the police put out a warrant. He had to get surgery and the social worker told him to apply for help. After a few weeks the social worker called and said he should come in to sign the papers. When he got to the hospital the police were waiting for him. *Ivonne, 27, Idaho*

## HOUSING

Immigrants face many difficulties in finding safe housing. Obtaining a mortgage without a social security number is not possible in many places, and the fear of losing that investment if deported prevents immigrants from buying homes. Immigrants also face discrimination from landlords. Undocumented immigrants, and some immigrants with legal status, do not qualify for housing assistance. The inability to secure safe housing makes integration into a community more difficult.

My family and I came from Somalia because of the war and we got asylum. I waited for Section 8 federal housing assistance for over three years. My husband lived in California before we got the assistance, and I could not pay rent so my children and I were living in a women's shelter. A year or so after we got Section 8, my husband moved to Seattle. We thought the State workers and the Section 8 workers were the same, so we informed the State workers, but not the

Section 8 workers, that he was living with us. A little while later the Section 8 workers called and told us they were canceling the assistance because we did not fill out paperwork, but we did not know that we had to. If we had known the rules, we would never have taken a chance and tried to cheat the system like they think we did. I tried to inform them about my husband, but miscommunicated by telling the wrong people. A lawyer told us there is nothing we can do because the rules are so strict. I don't want to go back to a shelter with my kids, who are settled in their school and happy in our home, but we can't pay the rent without help. My husband has nowhere to go and we have no other family here. *Halima, 27, Washington*

The manager of our apartment is trying to kick us out because they say we have too many kids. We have to find another place. We have tried to buy a house but we cannot because we are immigrants. *Maria, 44, Idaho*

## FEAR OF DEPORTATION

A recurring theme among interviewees was fear of deportation. Immigrants described the difficulty of going about daily life with the knowledge of the risks attached to driving, working, shopping, going to school.

I had a bad experience with immigration officers when I was in middle school. My parents were working in the fields. When I came home they weren't there. It was getting dark and my parents didn't arrive. I was getting worried. The next day I still didn't know what happened. Eventually I found out that my parents were working in the fields and the immigration officers arrived and took every one. They deported my parents without caring who they were leaving behind. I had to go live with my brother for one month while my parents came back. I don't know why we have to pass through all this pain. The only crime my parents committed was to come to this country in search of a better future. When I remember that experience I get really scared because you never know if that's going to happen again. *Salvador, 21, Idaho*

Some immigrants described experiences of deportation. In 1997, immigration officials came to our job and took us away. Our children were left alone and other family members helped take care of them while we came back into the States. *Maria, 44, Idaho*

Other immigrants, who had not been deported, explained that the fear of deportation still prevented them from participating in community life and normal activities.

When we first got here, it was hard not knowing how to get around. Then the cold weather came and we were afraid to get heat for our house because we thought we would get deported. Some people from the church helped us get heat.

*Maria, 70, Idaho*

There are many things I like about living in the United States. But one year ago, there was a lot of immigration officer activity and we had to spend the whole week locked up in our home. You ask yourself whether it's worth it. It's a terrible thing for my children to go through, and to see their parents going through. We couldn't even go out for a gallon of milk. *Martha Gonzales, Washington*

When you go out you're always looking over your shoulder. You're always thinking, 'I may not come back to my house.' *Pilar, 37, Washington*

Parents worried that they would be taken by immigration officials and that their children would be left behind.

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**When you go out you're always looking over your shoulder. You're always thinking, "I may not come back to my house."** *Pilar*

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I have heard rumors that when immigration takes people it doesn't matter to them if you are the mother of children or the father of children. What they do is separate the family. Even if the children are screaming and crying it doesn't matter to the migra [immigration officials]. *Clara, Oregon*

The hardest experience for me has been to grow up without parents. To give me and my siblings a better life, they moved to the U.S. when I was eight and my little sister was just born. We had many deprivations, but the worst was the warmth and caring of my parents. I moved here when I was 20. Now I worry about my own children. They were born here and have many more opportunities than I did, but the insecurity of knowing I could be deported is always there. *Josefina, 32, Oregon*

## CONCLUSION

Our immigration system places immigrants in situations that deny them basic human dignity.

- Immigrants' civil rights are violated, and increasingly so in the wake of September 11.
- Immigrants are denied access to basic elements of American life, including driver's licenses and housing.
- Institutional discrimination against immigrants prevents them from full participation in community life.

## CHAPTER 7

# KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

People tend to look at people who live outside the borders as “them” and the people on this side as “us.” But if you get to know people, it’s just us. There’s no them—they just happen to live on the other side of the border. It’s a made up border. You can put up fences, but you can’t force people to separate. *John, 28, Idaho*

## KEY FINDINGS

Immigrants to Oregon, Washington, and Idaho come from every continent. Yet within their diversity of racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds lies a shared experience that is characterized by hope, desperation, and often hardship. Regardless of their country of origin, the vast majority of immigrants come to the U.S. for the survival and well-being of themselves and their families. Whether they are seeking an escape from political persecution or poverty, immigrants without documentation assume grave risk and face various inequities because of their immigration status. The following summary of findings is derived from the shared experiences of the 230 immigrants interviewed for this study and represent thousands more immigrants who currently reside within our Northwest states. These findings reflect the effects of state and federal policies and practices on the experience of recent immigrants.

### **BORDER POLICIES LEAD TO HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS.**

Immigrants who try to enter the country without documents face life-threatening risks. Many people surveyed in this study cited fear, exploitation, and extreme danger in their attempts to enter the United States. People hire, and are often exploited by, coyotes to guide them through dangerous desert crossings that often result in death. Increased funding for security and law enforcement measures at the U.S.-Mexico border has created and exacerbated this human rights crisis. Yet despite the dangers, people will continue to attempt to enter the United States without documentation for compelling political, economic, and personal reasons.

### **THE IMMIGRATION SYSTEM IS FAILING TO PROVIDE MEANINGFUL PATHWAYS TO CITIZENSHIP.**

For many immigrants, the immigration system does not provide a path to citizenship. People surveyed in this report cited numerous examples of failures within the immigration

system. Even those who are able to hire attorneys to advocate on their behalf and to help them navigate the system are often left frustrated and forced to break rules to stay with their families. Because of limits on visa eligibility, millions of people in the United States are without legal immigration status and have no prospect for getting legal status. The complexity of the immigration law creates a paperwork nightmare for immigrants and makes immigrants vulnerable to exploitation by advocates, employers, and others. Undocumented immigrants are eager for the opportunity to gain immigration status and remain undocumented because they have no other choice.

### **IMMIGRANTS FACE WORKPLACE EXPLOITATION AND DISCRIMINATION BECAUSE OF THEIR IMMIGRATION STATUS.**

Immigrants who do not have legal immigration status or work authorization are forced to take low-paying jobs with no benefits. Immigrants are subjected to hazardous working conditions and workplace discrimination and harassment. Immigrants who have education, work experience, and professional credentials in their countries of origin are often unable to obtain work in the United States that allows them to use this training and experience.

### **IMMIGRANTS TO THE NORTHWEST HAVE LITTLE ACCESS TO BASIC SERVICES AND BENEFITS, INCLUDING HEALTH CARE AND HIGHER EDUCATION.**

Very few immigrants in the Northwest have access to health insurance, and most pay for health care out of pocket when they cannot avoid seeking medical care. Due primarily to fear and a lack of information, people profiled in this report rarely apply for public benefits like food stamps and cash assistance even when they qualify for these programs. In addition, because of the high cost of out-of-state tuition and the lack of financial assistance for immigrant students, even those who graduate from public schools within the state, immigrants are often shut out of higher education.

### **MANY IMMIGRANTS FACE DISCRIMINATION AND CIVIL RIGHTS ABUSES.**

People surveyed in this report cited examples of discrimination from individuals and institutions based on their immigration status. The anti-immigrant backlash that followed September 11th and the ongoing war on terrorism have led

to civil rights violations and abuses for many immigrants in the Northwest. Institutional discrimination against immigrants in housing, law enforcement, and other areas precludes immigrants from participating fully in community life.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Immigration is a defining feature of America's history and of America's future. Yet as the testimonies in this report repeatedly attest, America's current immigration system is broken. Current immigration policies leave millions of immigrants in the shadows, vulnerable to abuse and hardship because they lack legal documentation. To address these problems, government must develop policies that focus on creating meaningful pathways to citizenship, reuniting families, strengthening labor protections, providing basic services, and protecting human rights and civil liberties

### **CREATE MEANINGFUL PATHWAYS TO CITIZENSHIP**

Legal status and U.S. citizenship allow individuals to become full participating members of society and to reunite with their families. Undocumented immigrants currently living in the U.S. should be able to receive work permits and travel permission, and those who want to settle in the United States should be eligible for permanent residence and citizenship.

Specific recommendations include: reduce the backlog of cases and eliminate long processing delays; speed up processing times for naturalization applications; increase the number of available visas in current quota systems to allow families to be united more quickly; remove literacy barriers for elderly immigrants and immigrants who lacked access to education in their native language; reduce the poverty guideline level so that low-income families can be together; and provide immigrants with legal counsel in navigating the legal system.

### **STRENGTHEN AND ENFORCE WORKER PROTECTIONS**

Immigrant workers in the United States often work in situations of wage exploitation, discrimination, and exposure to life-threatening dangers on the job. Measures must be taken to ensure that all workers in this country – regardless of status – are covered by and able to enforce all labor and employment rights.

Specific recommendations include: afford immigrant workers, whether they are permanent residents, temporary residents, guest workers, or undocumented immigrants, the same labor protections as U.S. citizens, including equal la-

bor rights and remedies and compensation for injuries on the job; provide access to workers compensation for immigrant workers.

### **BROADEN OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMMIGRANTS TO BECOME A PART OF COMMUNITY LIFE**

Our immigration policies should provide immigrants with opportunities to learn English, naturalize, lead prosperous lives, engage in cultural expression, and receive equitable access to needed services and higher education.

Specific recommendations include: providing adult immigrants with quality English instruction; support programs to promote and prepare people for citizenship; offer support to local communities working to welcome newcomers; provide access to in-state tuition and financial assistance to students who are non-citizens but have attended schools in the Northwest; offer adequate resources to provide for decent, safe and affordable housing.

### **PROTECT IMMIGRANTS FROM CIVIL RIGHTS VIOLATIONS AND INSTITUTIONAL DISCRIMINATION**

Since September 11, 2001, implementation of sweeping law enforcement policies has eroded fundamental civil liberties. Civil rights should be uniform for all residents of the United States, and immigrants should have access to these protections.

Specific recommendations include: Restore basic due process rights for immigrants who are incarcerated or accused of crimes; provide meaningful access to the courts in both immigration and criminal proceedings; end selective enforcement of the laws, including immigration laws, based on race, religion, gender, or national origin; enforce laws against human trafficking and worker exploitation; educate immigrants about their legal rights.

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## **ABOUT THE ORGANIZATION RELEASING THIS REPORT**



**Northwest Federation of Community Organizations (NWFCO)** is a regional federation of four statewide, community-based social and economic justice organizations located in the states of Idaho, Montana, Oregon, and Washington: Idaho Community Action Network (ICAN), Montana People's Action (MPA), Oregon Action (OA), and Washington Citizen Action (WCA). Collectively, these organizations engage in community organizing and coalition building in 14 rural and major metropolitan areas, including the Northwest's largest cities (Seattle and Portland) and the largest cities in Montana and Oregon. 1265 South Main Street Suite #305, Seattle, WA98144, Voice: (206) 568-5400, Fax: (206) 568-5444, Web: <http://www.nwfc.org>

