

**Immigration Enforcement, Child-Parent Separations and Recidivism  
by Central American Deportees**

Catalina Amuedo-Dorantes\* (San Diego State University)

Susan Pozo (Western Michigan University)

Thitima Puttitanun (San Diego State University)

**JEL Codes:** F22, K37

**Keywords:** Immigration Enforcement, Child-parent Separations, Recidivism by Deportees, Central American migrants.

(\* Presenter: Address: 5500 Campanile Drive, Nasatir Hall #310, San Diego, CA 92182.  
Phone: 619-594-1663. Fax: 619-594-5062. Email: camuedod@mail.sdsu.edu

## Long Abstract

**Background:** According to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (2014), apprehensions of undocumented immigrants from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras have risen from about 94,000 in 2008 to nearly 142,000 in 2012. Over the same period, total annual U.S. deportations of illegal immigrants has fallen (from about 1 million in 2008 to about 0.6 million in 2012), with apprehensions of Mexicans at about half their 2008 level. Clearly there has been a dramatic shift in the origin of illegal border crossers from Mexico to areas south.

Concurrent with the shift in the origin of the deported, immigration scholars have expressed increased concern about the impact of U.S. immigration policy on the family—in particular the rising number of family separations thought to be the result of harsher enforcement policies. In this work, we explore this phenomenon by focusing on the impact of child-parent separations on the effectiveness of current illegal immigration deterrent policies on Salvadorian, Guatemalan and Honduran deportees. First, we examine how tighter border and interior enforcement is impacting child-parent separations. Have more stringent enforcement policies increased family separations and, if so, to what extent? Subsequently, we explore how leaving children behind might reduce the deterrence effect of increased enforcement. Are deported immigrants who are separated from their children more likely to attempt a new illegal crossing? And, if they are, does the family separation impact counter the potential deterrence effect of increased enforcement?

We find that the deterrent effect of increased border and interior enforcement policies is wiped away by the pull of the children left behind. Understandably, parents who are forcibly separated from their children have every intention to attempt an illegal crossing once again.

**Data:** To address the aforementioned questions, we use the *Encuesta Sobre Migración en la Frontera Sur de México* (EMIF SUR) –which stands for *Survey on Migration at the Southern Mexican Border*. The EMIF SUR is a migration survey conducted by El Colegio de la Frontera (COLEF) with the support of multiple governmental organizations and the Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología (Conacyt) along the Mexico southern border. We use data from the 2008 through 2013 waves and exploit the module that interviews individuals that have been deported from the United States and returned by air (by U.S. immigration authorities) to Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador (*Migrantes devueltos por autoridades Estadounidenses al aeropuerto de Honduras/Guatemala/El Salvador*). This module is highly representative of the overall population of unauthorized Guatemalan, Honduran and Salvadorian immigrants apprehended in the United States and returned to their home countries.

Our sample consists of a total of 24,883 persons interviewed upon arrival to their home country by trained interviewers employed by COLEF. They are asked about demographic and family characteristics, details about their travel from Honduras/Guatemala/El Salvador to the United States, their current and prior migration experiences, the circumstances surrounding their apprehension and deportation and their expectations concerning future crossings into the United

States. Descriptive statistics for a few characteristics of deportees in our sample are displayed in Table 1.

**Table 1: Descriptive Statistics**

Characteristics	Border Crossing Deportees	Deportees Apprehended in the Interior
Male	0.90	0.93
Age	27.13	29.6
Left children behind	0.039	0.174
No education	0.08	0.05
Primary	0.53	0.44
Secondary	0.21	0.29
Baccalaureate	0.15	0.19
University	0.02	0.02
Used coyote	0.57	0.58
Days in U.S. last	90.4	1559
Total crossings	1.4	1.3
Total deportations	0.25	0.67
Observations	3,648	21,235

About 15 percent of the total sample was apprehended at the U.S.-Mexico border, while 85 percent of this sample was detained in the interior of the United States. Nearly 4 percent of those apprehended while crossing indicate having a child younger than 15 years of age in the United States. That share is significantly higher (17.4 percent) for those apprehended after having successfully crossed the border. The difference might be related to the duration of their migration spell, which is an average of 3 months for those apprehended while crossing versus 4.3 years for those apprehended in the interior.

**Methodology:** Our **first aim** is to learn about the impact of increased border and interior enforcement on family separations. To accomplish this aim, we utilize individual level data on deportees and compare changes in the extent of parent-child separations –as captured by reporting leaving a child younger than 15 years of age in the United States – in *treated* vs. *control* Border Patrol sectors or U.S. states *pre* -vs. *post*- implementation of increased border/interior enforcement. The analysis is performed separately for those apprehended while crossing the border and those apprehended in the interior. Our benchmark model is given by:

$$(1) \quad Y_{ist} = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 \text{Enforcement}_{st} + X_{ist}\gamma + \delta_s + \varphi_t + \delta_s t + \varepsilon_{ist}, \quad \varepsilon_{ist} \sim N(0,1)$$

where:  $i=1, \dots, n$  individuals,  $s$ =Border Patrol sector or U.S. state where they were apprehended, and  $t$ =(month, year).  $Y_{ist}$  equals 1 if the  $i$ th deported migrant, who last migrated in time  $t$  and was apprehended in Border Patrol sector or U.S. state  $s$ , indicates leaving a child behind.  $\text{Enforcement}_{st}$  is a dummy variable equal to 1 if the migrant was apprehended in a Border Patrol sector or U.S. state with increased enforcement. Enhanced *border* enforcement is captured by

the progressive implementation by various Border Patrol sectors of Operation Streamline, which implemented a “Zero Tolerance Policy” that implied that *all* illegal immigrants were subject to criminal prosecution. Increased *interior* enforcement is measured by the implementation of a range of state-level and local-level measures. Among the state-level measures, we consider omnibus immigration laws (like SB1070 in Arizona) and 287(g) agreements between Immigration Customs Enforcement (ICE) and state police –both designed with the purpose of identifying and removing undocumented immigrants. The local-level measures include 287(g) agreements between ICE and local police, as well as Secure Communities –a program designed to take over the 287(g) agreements. Just as the 287(g) agreements, Secure Communities involves the cooperation of local police with ICE in order to identify and remove undocumented immigrants. The vector  $X$  includes individual level characteristics traditionally incorporated when modeling migration experiences and decisions. Additionally, equation (1) includes a series of Border Patrol sector or U.S. state fixed-effects, time fixed-effects and Border Patrol sector/U.S. state-time trends in order to capture fixed and time-varying regional and macroeconomic factors affecting our outcomes. Border Patrol sector and U.S. state fixed-effects can help capture time invariant geographic characteristics, such as a political environment hostile to immigration –a trait potentially related to the extent of parent-child separations, or the presence of networks in specific crossing points –a trait that can lower migration costs and increase the intent to return to the United States. Time fixed-effects, are also incorporated in the model. They help account for economy-wide shocks that could impact the likelihood of such separations by affecting investments in police training or the probability of indicating a desire to return to the United States in the future given the economic climate. Finally, the inclusion of Border Patrol sector or U.S. state-specific time trends addresses a key identification assumption in the analysis described above –namely the existence of similar pre-treatment trends in *treated* and *control* Border Patrol sectors or U.S. states.

Our **second aim** is to understand how, in turn, parent-child separations impact deportees’ reported intent to commit recidivism (attempt a new crossing into the U.S.) in the short- and long-run, as well as to gauge whether or not that impact counteracts the deterrence effect of increased enforcement itself. To that end, we estimate an equation similar to equation (1) above, where our dependent variable indicates deportees’ reported intent to return to the United States in the next 30 days or ever. However, unlike equation (1), the new model also contains information on whether the migrant reported having left a child younger than 15 years of age in the United States.

$$(2) \quad Y_{ist} = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 \text{Enforcement}_{st} + \alpha_2 \text{Child Left Behind}_{ist} + X_{ist} \gamma + \delta_s + \varphi_t + \delta_s t + \varepsilon_{ist},$$

$$\varepsilon_{ist} \sim N(0,1)$$

**Preliminary Findings:** Increased interior enforcement of immigration statues has resulted in a dramatic increase in the likelihood of parent-child separations. Increased border enforcement

also raises this incidence, although by a smaller amount. We also find deterrence is much less likely in the case of parents with children less than 15 remaining in the United States. While state- and local-level enhanced enforcement policies tend to decrease the intent to re-migrate to the United States within 30 days by 1 to 2 percentage points, deportees who have left children under 15 behind report a 10.5 percentage point increase in the likelihood of attempting a new crossing within a month. Logically, deportees with a child in the United States have a greater incentive to attempt, at any costs, a new crossing.

**Policy Implications:** This study examines how increased immigration enforcement is impacting parent-child separations and, in turn, the unintended consequences of such parent-child separations on the likelihood of recidivism of an understudied, yet growing, population of undocumented immigrants to the United States, as is the case of Central Americans. We find that the growing incidence of parent-child separations resulting from increased immigration enforcement is, simultaneously, reducing the ability of tougher immigration policies to keep illegal immigration at bay.

Understanding the impacts of tougher immigration enforcement policies on parent-child separations and on the re-migration of deportees is of great policy interest, especially at a time when a comprehensive immigration reform that might envision the expansion of some of these measures nationwide is still pending. Given the current evidence of increased human right abuses and life risks claimed by migrants, as well as the growing expenditures on enforcement, the merit of these measures rests solely on their ability to deter illegal immigration. While we are not able to gauge the impact that these policies are having on overall illegal immigration, the fact that these policies do not seem to reduce the intention to migrate illegally by this increasingly important population raises the question of their overall effectiveness.

## References

U.S. Department of Homeland Security, *2012 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics*, <http://www.dhs.gov/yearbook-immigration-statistics>, downloaded March 8, 2014.