

AMERICAN FRATERNITY

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT BY A COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATION

RESEARCH-BASED REPORT PRODUCED BY

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ASSISTANCE WITH THE COORDINATION
OF FIELDWORK PROVIDED BY
AMERICAN FRATERNITY



Introduction

This research report sheds light on the role of American Fraternity, a community-based not-for-profit organization in Miami, which assists immigrant families – prominently those with deportable and deported members, including children and adolescents who are U.S. citizens yet have been affected by the detention and deportation of their parents.

The report builds upon fieldwork and a framework that highlights the historical role of associations in civic engagement in the United States for the advancement of specific goals. Arguably, American Fraternity (AF) is a case study that allows us to further understand the inner logics of these organizations as we improve our understanding of the particularities of the one studied. Fourteen individuals were interviewed by the author¹ in southern areas of Miami-Dade County from July 17 through July 26, 2014. The research included several conversations and semi-structured interviews with Nora Sandigo, founder and Executive Director of American Fraternity (AF); semi-structured interviews with twelve immigrants from Central America, all of whom have children who recently crossed the Southwestern border as unaccompanied minors; and one interview with a young immigrant of 18 years of age who had just reunited with his family in Miami after having crossed the border. The fieldwork included onsite observations at American Fraternity's office and at Sandigo's family home during one of the regular picnics that AF organizes for a large group of immigrant families from different areas of Miami, mainly from the area of Homestead. The report documents the history of struggles, achievements, and challenges of the organization as its leader, other members, and volunteers advance their goal of making a difference in the lives of vulnerable immigrant families and children. This report is particularly timely in light of the growing number of unaccompanied minors and young adults

who are crossing borders throughout Central America to reach U.S. soil through the border with Mexico.

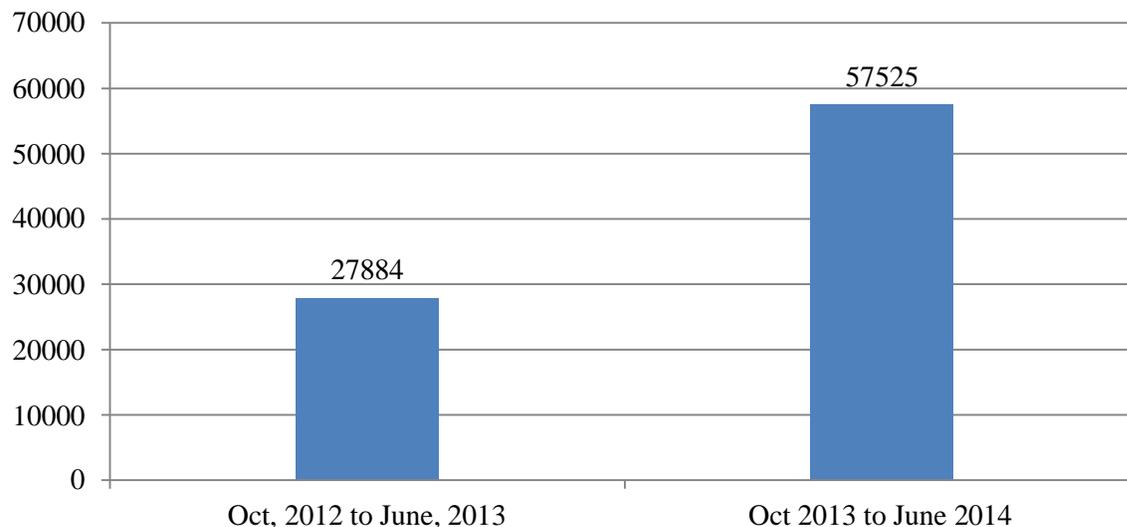
I am especially grateful of Nora Sandigo, Executive Director of American Fraternity for her assistance with the organization of the fieldwork and for providing the information about the organization that is presented in this work. My immense gratitude goes also to the immigrants who participated in the interviews. All of them are going through difficult situations at this moment. They carry their own dramatic experiences with them, and most of them and their children face an uncertain future associated with their immigration status. I also appreciate the assistance of Hannah Romig and Heidi Savavi with editorial tasks.

Hopefully, this report, which has been developed by the author on a voluntary basis, will shed light on aspects of the everyday lives and needs of the immigrants we tend to see portrayed through numbers. It focuses on children (immigrants and citizens) who are going through some of the most dramatic aspects of the immigrant experience. The report may also create greater understanding of the role played by many civic organizations in the United States that have been committed to the noble cause of assisting vulnerable groups of immigrants and their children. American Fraternity figures prominently among these organizations.

Background

Graph 1 below shows the number of apprehensions of minors at the border with Mexico for fiscal years 2013 and 2014 (compared using the same time period). It shows that so far within the current fiscal year, 57, 525 minors (0-17 years of age) were apprehended at the border with Mexico, compared to 27,884 apprehensions in the same period in the previous fiscal year. The numbers show a dramatic increase of 106% compared to the similar period in fiscal year 2013.

Graph 1: Southwest Border Unaccompanied Children (0-17 years old), apprehensions from October 1, 2013 to June 30, 2014, compared to the Same Time Period for Fiscal Year 2013.



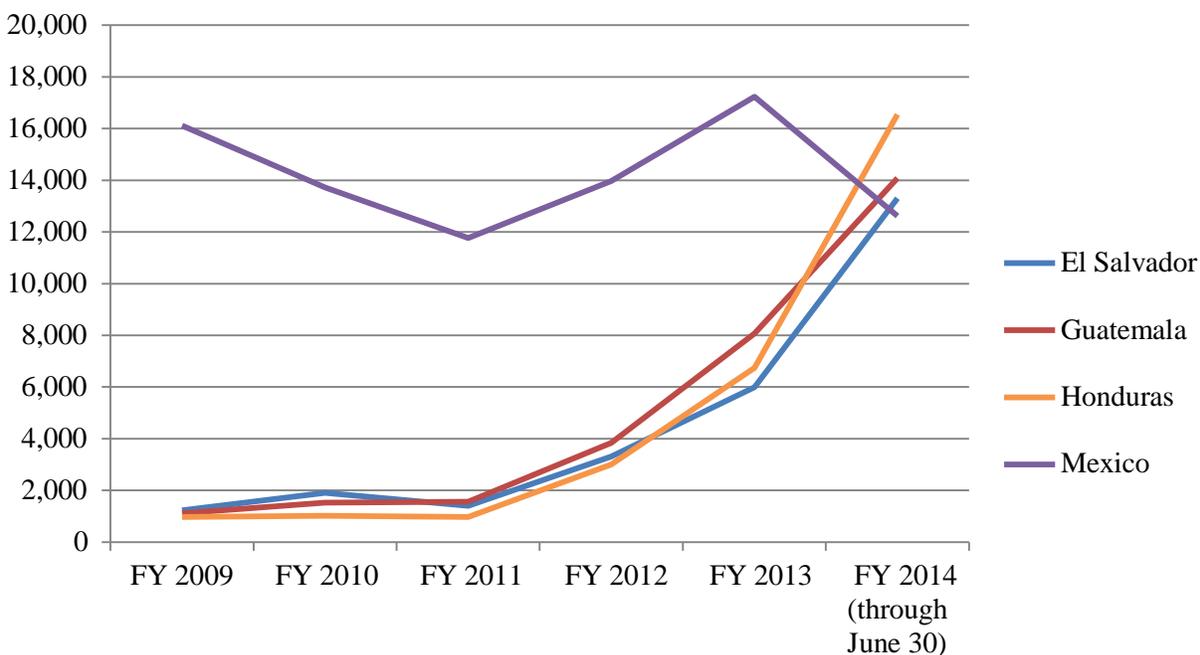
Source: Graph elaborated by the author based on data from U.S. Customs and Border Protection, including October 1, 2013 - June 30, 2014 and the same time period for Fiscal Year 2013.

In addition to the phenomenon of unaccompanied children crossing the border with Mexico, three interrelated phenomena also point to the traumatic situation many families, especially from Central America, are going through in relation to the immigrant experience. First, the total number of apprehensions has increased, and these include both minors and adults.

Second, the number of women apprehended in the Southwest border grew from 42,590 in FY 2011 to 68,645 in FY 2013, and the number of apprehensions of men went from 284,984 to 345,752 during the same period. Third, immigrants from three Central American countries — Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador — account for much of the increase. The number of “other-than Mexican” apprehensions went from 46,997 in FY 2011 to 148,988 in FY 2013.² This situation puts significant pressure on the U.S. government, the children and adults who are crossing the border, and the family members with whom they have been reunited or expect to be reunited with. The situations involving children are particularly delicate.

Graph 2 shows the number of children encountered in the Southwest border area by country of origin of the children, from 2009 to 2014. Mexico exhibits a different trend with respect to the Central American countries reflected in the graph. The number of children encountered in border areas who were from Mexico fluctuated between 2009 and June 2014 with a drop in 2011, a peak in 2013, and then another drop in the number in 2014. However, the numbers from Mexico remain high despite the fluctuations; with a total of 85,434 Mexican children encountered in the entire period and an average of 14,239 per fiscal year. In the case of Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador, some fluctuation occurred between 2009 and 2011 but since then, the numbers show sustained growth and a peak between 2013 and 2014 in the cases of Honduras and El Salvador. The number of Guatemalan children encountered in the Southwest border areas, were the highest amongst Central American countries between 2011 and 2013, to be surpassed by Hondurans in 2014.

Graph 2: Southwest Border Unaccompanied Children (0-17 years old), Fiscal Years 2009 to 2013 and FY 2014 (from October 1, 2013 to June 30, 2014), by Country of Origin of the Minors.



Source: Graph elaborated by the author based on data by border sectors from U.S. Customs and Border Protection.

It should also be noted that the current migration context is characterized by an increase in the number of adults from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras claiming asylum in the United States. A 2014 report by the UNHCR notes that “the number of adults claiming fear of return to their countries of origin to government officials upon arriving at a port of entry or apprehension at the southern border increased sharply from 5,369 in fiscal year (FY) 2009, to 36,174 in FY 2013,” and that “[i]ndividuals from El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, and Mexico account for 70% of the increase.”³ The report also indicates that children are crossing borders in the context of “mixed migrations,” or migrations that include a mixed group of people, some of whom are in need of international protection while others are not. The UNHCR recommends that the government incorporate “refugee protection considerations” as they develop policies to address this specific type of migration.⁴

Asylum claims within Central America grew at a rapid pace between 2008 and 2013. According to data from the UNHCR, the number of asylum applications from El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, in Mexico, Panama, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Belize between 2008 and 2013 increased 712%.⁵ Data from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security processed by the author confirms this trend; the total number of asylum claims from El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, and Honduras in the United States peaked between 2003 and 2012. It has been extensively documented in hearings and by the media that well-founded fears concerning migrants' physical or overall integrity have pushed them from Central America across borders. The current context of increasing-scale emigration from Central America cannot be separated from widespread violence in many areas of the region; a situation that is entangled with other social, economic, and political problems. In the report *Countering Criminal Violence in Central America*, Michael Shifter, President of Inter-American Dialogue, points to the dramatic situation Central American countries, particularly Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador, face concerning escalating violent crimes:

Violent crime in Central America — particularly in the "northern triangle" of Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala — is reaching breathtaking levels. Murder rates in the region are among the highest in the world. To a certain extent, Central America's predicament is one of geography — it is sandwiched between some of the world's largest drug producers in South America and the world's largest consumer of illegal drugs, the United States. The region is awash in weapons and gunmen, and high rates of poverty ensure substantial numbers of willing recruits for organized crime syndicates.⁶

Children Crossing Borders

In 2003, the organization Save the Children issued the report "Children on the Move: Protecting Unaccompanied Migrant Children in South Africa and the Region." The report

concluded that, “child migration entails trafficking and refugee movement, and demonstrates that children often cross borders unaccompanied as a survival strategy.”⁷ In 2004, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the International Rescue Committee, Save the Children, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and World Vision jointly produced the document, “Inter-Agency Guiding Principles on Unaccompanied and Separated Children.” Their emphasis was on universal aspects, basic principles, and procedures for the protection of unaccompanied and separated children.⁸ The report established a distinction between separated children and unaccompanied children, which is not centered on migrant children exclusively, but lays important foundations concerning the principle of protection:

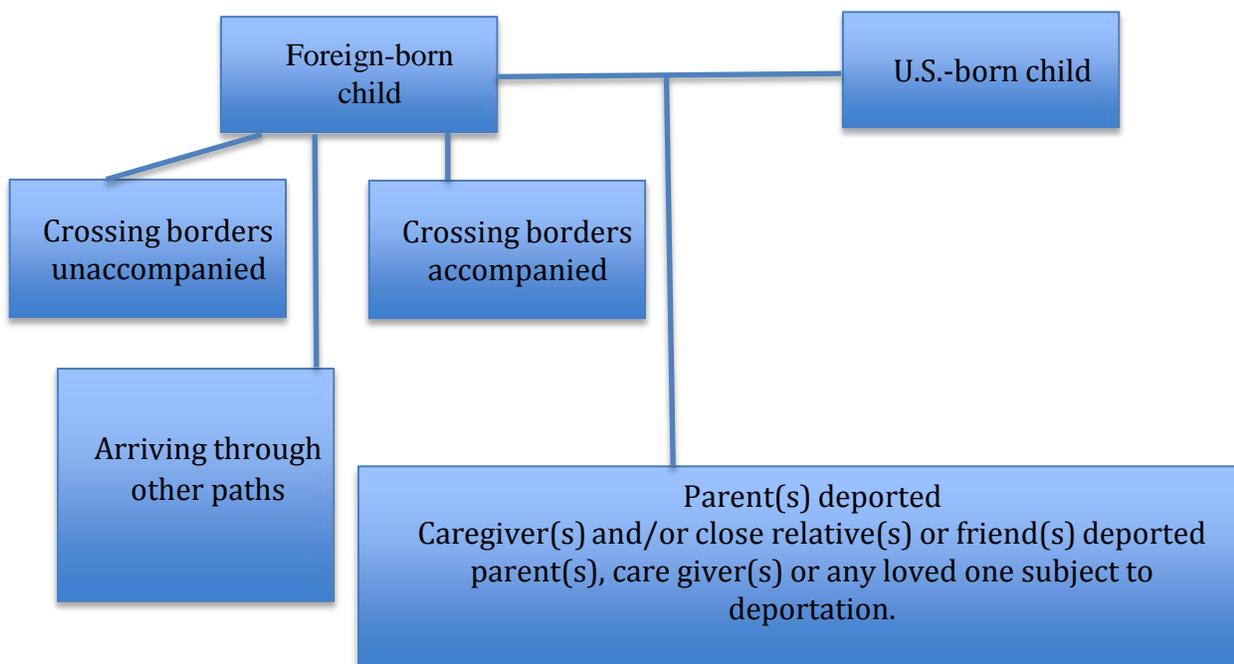
Separated children are those separated from both parents, or from their previous legal or customary caregiver, but not necessarily from other relatives. These may, therefore, include children accompanied by other adult family members.

Unaccompanied children (also called unaccompanied minors) are children who have been separated from both parents and other relatives and are not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible for doing so.⁹

An important aspect of the above definitions is the emphasis on the role that the parents or the customary caregiver in the family unit plays and the wellbeing of the child(ren). This principle has become fundamental, not only for the identification of what is in the best interest of the children in cases involving caregiving when they arrive, but also for issues pertaining to the involuntary repatriation or deportation of the two parents, or one parent. Thus, it allows us to grasp some of the manifold dimensions and human drama behind the situation of immigrant families with children. However, in the case of children affected by the immigrant experience, one can have several scenarios, including but not limited to: 1) when the child crosses the

border(s), 2) when the child crosses the border(s) in the company of a parent, the two parents, or a close caring relative, and 3) when the child travels through a less hazardous path yet either accompanied or without company in the sense of a child’s trusted caring person. In addition, the child may have been born in the United States and still face traumatic experiences related to the immigrant experience of their parents. The issue of deportation places both immigrant children and U.S. citizen children in extremely stressful situations. The overall possibilities addressed here can be divided into the following scenarios:

Figure 1: Sample of Scenarios a Child Can Face Related to the Deportation of Parents or Other Loved Ones



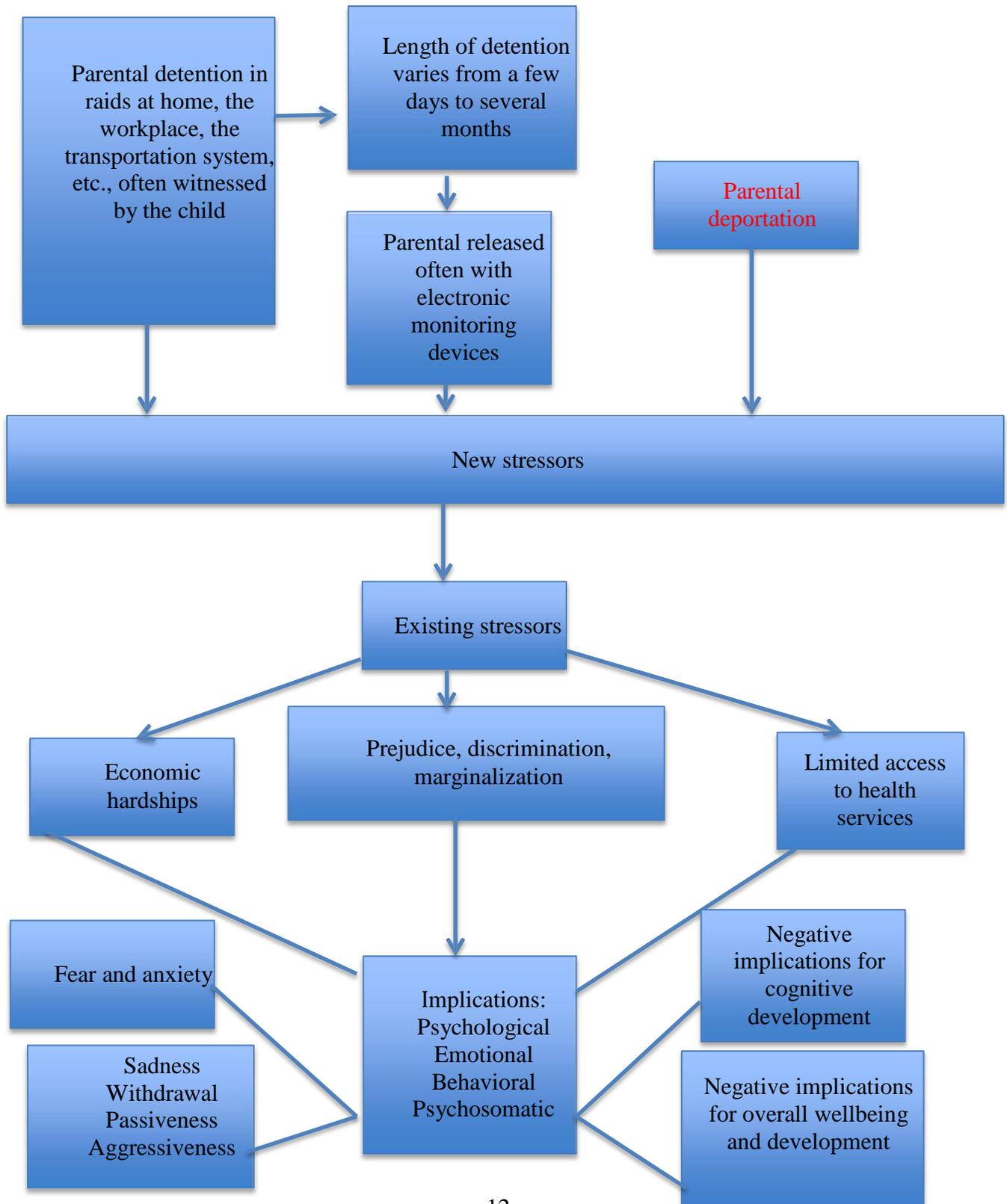
In its study, *Facing Our Future, Children in the Aftermath of Immigration Enforcement*, the Urban Institute researched the consequences of parental arrest, detention, and deportation for children from six locations across the United States. The findings indicate that the children

displayed adverse behavioral changes as many were exposed to a combination of factors such as separations from parents and economic hardships. In sync with other studies on the psychological and emotional effects of deportations on the affected children, the study in question documents “serious risks to children’s immediate safety, economic security, well-being, and longer-term development.”¹⁰ A report for the Inter-American Human Rights Court, dated August 2013, cites estimates on the structure of the family of undocumented immigrants and issues of separation. Based on different sources it indicates that 82% of the children born to undocumented immigrants in the United States are U.S. citizens by birth; 10% of the undocumented population is made up of minors, and that “between July 2010 and September 2012, 205,000 deportees reported having at least one U.S.-citizen child, resulting in an estimated annual average of approximately 90,000 parental deportations.”¹¹ The article, “Deportation Separated Thousands of U.S.-Born Children from Parents in 2013,” posted by the Huffington Post on June, 2014 reports that authenticated figures from ICE indicate that immigration enforcement had led to “72,410 removals of immigrants who said they had one or more U.S.-born children in 2013.”¹²

The psychological and emotional impact of detention and deportation on children of migrant families has been extensively documented. Figure 2 below shows a partial synthesis of the consequences based on the insights provided in the above-mentioned studies by the Urban Institute and the Report for the Inter-American Human Rights Court. These reports show that a difficult situation in the family associated with detentions and deportations tends to add stressors to existing difficult situations insofar as many children of deportees or potential deportees also face economic hardships, prejudice, discrimination, and other difficult situations. Some of the negative impacts illustrated in Figure 2 also apply to children from households with better

economic situations than those of immigrants with less economic means in the U.S., although the former constitutes the minority of cases.

Figure 2. Common Situations Children of Detainees and Deportees Face and Some of the Consequences for the Children¹³



Overall, the drama of the deportation of parents and close relatives and caregivers affects thousands of children in the United States, including foreign-born children as well as children who are U.S. citizens. In addition, the child might be subject to a removal process as well. As children from Central America arrive from Mexico in growing numbers, there are thousands of children in the United States, many of whom are U.S. citizens, whose parents (or one parent) have been deported or are facing imminent deportation. It has been estimated that between the last quarter of FY 2010 and the last quarter of FY 2012, 181,963 persons who had U.S.-citizen children had been deported or had a deportation order either pending or sought by immigration authorities; Miami had 4,330 parents in this situation in the same period of time.¹⁴ There is increasing awareness about the socioeconomic impact of this drama, although it has not been sufficiently studied yet.

American Fraternity: Civic Engagement for the Protection of Unaccompanied and Separated Children

“A brilliant achievement may win for you the favor of people at one stroke, a long succession of little services rendered and obscure good deeds – a constant habit of kindness, and an established reputation for disinterestedness – will be required.” Alex de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*.

The Role of Civic Organizations: The Experience of American Fraternity

During his trip to America in the early 1830s, Alex de Tocqueville, a French observer whose work would eventually be discussed in social science academic programs throughout the United States, noticed the relative ease with which political, civic, religious or other types of associations could be formed in the United States. He stated, using a tone that indicated deep admiration, that the United States was the only country in the world “where the continual

exercise of the right of association has been introduced into civil life.” He also emphasized the uniqueness of the role of associations in the structure of the U.S. democratic system with respect to other systems of the most developed countries: “Everywhere that, at the head of a new undertaking, you see the government in France and a great lord in England, count on it that you will perceive an association in the United States.”¹⁵ Tocqueville proceeded to explain:

Americans use associations to give fêtes, to found seminaries, to build inns, to raise churches, to distribute books, to send missionaries to the antipodes; in this manner they create hospitals, prisons, schools. Finally, if it is a question of bringing to light a truth or developing a sentiment with the support of a great example, they associate.¹⁶

The observations produced by Tocqueville almost two hundred years ago about the formation of civic associations in the United States, have become even more relevant in society as the growth of NGOs has become a major feature of specific countries and the international system as a whole.

As the incorporation of immigrants evolved as a major aspect of the socioeconomic, political, and cultural ambits of U.S. society, the formation of associations among immigrants has become one of the main instruments for adaptation and for the advancement of specific goals among immigrants. Associations have also become a tool of incorporation that is skillfully employed by governmental structures. Thus, immigrants in the United States have been at the forefront in the development of civic, religious, professional, and other kinds of associations for centuries, which is in sync with the use of immigrant organizations as a mechanism of adaptation and integration through socialization — and part and parcel of what has been portrayed as the overall use of immigrant organizations as a “technique of governance.”¹⁷ It has been noticed that the formal registration of immigrant associations has advantages for both the government and the immigrants insofar as they facilitate contacts and the formation and expansion of networks. Such

networks and contacts tend to involve government officials from many agencies that provide guidance, services, and funding. As the organizations become part of “the administrative discourse,” they have greater access to financial and other resources derived from their immersion in “knowledge and communication networks.” In turn, these links also facilitate socialization and the disciplining of the immigrants by teaching them “rules, norms, and obedience,” which create conditions for social stability.¹⁸

The formation of immigrant organizations has been a staple in Miami, which became even more noticeable when Cuban refugees started arriving *en masse* in search of protection. Since then, the formation of associations has been a central part of the immigrant experience, and the trend was reinforced as Miami’s foreign born population continued to grow to constitute about 50% of the total population, a level that has been sustained for many years. The role of immigrant associations in Miami has been particularly relevant for the advancement of immigrants’ goals, such as the transition from an immigration limbo in terms of status, into lawful permanent admission. Associations also raise awareness about the harms of deportations for children and families, advance issues pertaining to professional reaccreditation, and assist the most vulnerable segments of the immigrant population, among other goals. As Nicaraguan society went through a convulsive revolution and eventually transitioned into a totalitarian path, a new cycle of violence associated with armed conflicts led to the enactment of compulsory military service and resulted in mass population displacement within the country where thousands of Nicaraguans fled in search of a safe heaven. The exodus included thousands of children and adolescents who either left the country with their families or were sent to live and study abroad as part of the families’ strategy to cope with the situation. Guatemalans, Hondurans, and Salvadorans experienced a similar convulsive scenario associated with the Cold War

confrontations. Thousands of Central Americans crossed the Mexican border with the United States, and others arrived using less traumatic migration strategies such as immigrant and nonimmigrant visas, paroles, or they arrived with full recognition as refugees. However, tens of thousands remained undocumented or in an immigration limbo for many years – more than a decade for many. It is within this context that Central Americans formed immigrant associations in the United States, most of which would be devoted to immigration-related issues, including issues concerning immigration status or other aspects of the incorporation of immigrants into society. Many Nicaraguan immigrants saw in their associations a way to enhance their voices, recognition, civic consciousness and gain access to resources within a framework of socialization and political stability which was not available in the homeland.

American Fraternity is a civic organization and an immigrant organization as well insofar immigrants founded it. Since its foundation in 1989 (as Nicaraguan Fraternity), the organization has focused on assisting immigrant families in the United States. It has successfully advanced specific goals that many groups of activists and policymakers can relate to either because of their own personal experiences as immigrants or because of their experience representing immigrants as attorneys and/or community activists. American Fraternity's autonomy as a civic organization has led the organization to challenge the federal government in the courts when the government's actions were perceived to be abusive, discriminatory, or illegal for any reason. For many immigrant families and immigrant minors, organizations like American Fraternity constitute their only hope in their everyday struggle against mistaken policies enforced by two or more governments. The global organization Save the Children has made special mention to the role of civil society in assisting unaccompanied minors: "Civil society, especially national and international NGOs, can play an important role in providing services

to UMC [unaccompanied minor children], in strengthening the capacity of government and other service providers to protect UMC, and in informing and supporting government and other policy-makers and programmers about UMC issues.”¹⁹ American Fraternity exemplifies the role of NGOs in assisting unaccompanied children. Although it is not a nation-wide organization, it is engaged in debates and activism at several levels: regional, state, and national. Overall, though, it is a community-rooted organization from Miami, with a strong presence in Washington.

American Fraternity was originally created as Nicaraguan Fraternity in 1989 for the goal of assisting Nicaraguan refugees who were fleeing violence. Nora Sandigo, a refugee herself from Nicaragua who had several close relatives lose their lives during the armed conflict there, focused on assisting members of the Contra and other Nicaraguan refugees who had fought on the U.S. side of the conflict. Sandigo became puzzled by the fighting and joined a new kind of struggle where she worked to create a resonance box for the predicaments of thousands of Nicaraguan refugees who, in the best-case scenarios, had been neglected by the immigration system. She is currently the founder and Executive Director of American Fraternity; she is ultimately the soul of the organization. Over the years, as both Sandigo and the organization matured simultaneously in the mission of assisting immigrants, Nicaraguan Fraternity has expanded its role and became more inclusive and diversified by assisting immigrants of different backgrounds and persuasions as long as there was a real need for housing, food, access to health care, and other services, as well as family reunification and family unity, and the critical urgency of avoiding deportation.

American Fraternity and NACARA

In an interview conducted with Sandigo in 1997, I learned about the critical role played by Nicaraguan Fraternity in a movement to help migrant families. The combined efforts of social activists, immigrants, legislators, attorneys, and even consular officials materialized in the passage of the Nicaraguan Adjustment and Central American Relief Act (NACARA) that same year. NACARA eventually led to the adjudication of permanent legal status for over 70,000 Nicaraguans in the United States, allowing many to travel to their home country and return to the U.S. Thus, behind the enactment of NACARA lay two of the major characteristics of the immigration system of the United States: (1) that the system is hopeful because it is founded on solid democratic principles; one of which is the ability of the legal structures to correct the path either by enacting or revoking laws when united citizens, frequently through associations focused on immigrant rights, civil liberties, and family and human rights, document that policies are mistaken, and (2) that corrections take place in slow motion, and many families and individuals suffer, often for decades, the consequences of such a lethargic approach to policy changes. In fact, a refugee relief act benefitting Nicaraguans was approved almost a decade after the collapse of the government from which many had fled.²⁰ Although many Nicaraguans continued to flee violent scenarios that persisted during the transition period in the early 1990s, the fact is that many beneficiaries of NACARA had already left in the 1980s. Their integration into U.S. society was truncated because of the lack of a permanent status and such situations severely affected many Nicaraguan families throughout the U.S., particularly in Miami where most of them had settled.

The process of civic mobilization, which included everything from hunger strikes and marches in Miami and Washington D.C., to lobbying in the halls of U.S. Congress and the state legislature in Tallahassee, Florida, shows how what Tocqueville called *democracy in America* operates often upon the shoulders of community leaders and organizations. NACARA was enacted in the midst of a growing anti-immigration movement in the United States along with calls for the reengineering of the approach to both undocumented migrants and the welfare. The social activism prompted stricter laws to be enacted in the 1990s and created significant barriers for legal immigrants to access social services. It also opened the doors for the further criminalization of immigrants by significantly expanding the list of offenses that could lead to deportation.

Beyond NACARA

The scars and reminiscences of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States and the policy implications on migration issues, combined with other factors, which include the deep economic recession that started in 2007, have prompted a strong wave of anti-immigrant activism and lobbies for greater border control. In an interview with Nora Sandigo in 2009, she explained that in this new context, American Fraternity has focused on promoting immigration reform, stopping deportation, and in assisting families whose members are in imminent danger of being deported, with an emphasis on the children whose close relatives have been deported, are in detention centers, or could be deported at any time.²¹

Nicaragua Fraternity's growth into American Fraternity was possible because of the leader and collaborators' deep knowledge of the immigrant community and community affairs in

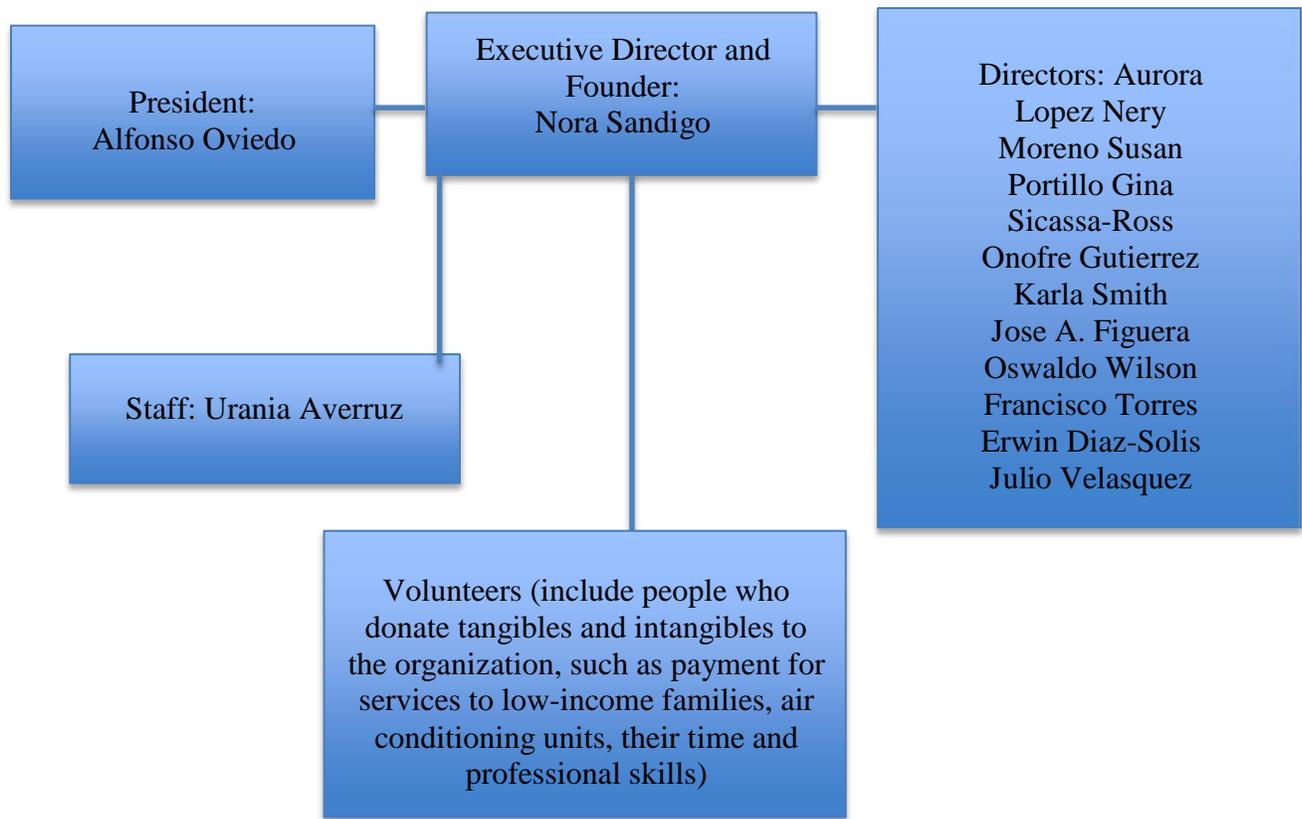
general. They had the capacity for networking and were able to connect people and institutions with resources to needy individuals and families, and cultivate relationships with politicians who advocated for similar issues, such as halting deportations.

The *modus operandi* of the organization is similar to other small community-based organizations in some important respects. For example, the overhead is minimal; the main leader is the person known in the community as “the face of the organization” and has deep knowledge and extensive networks with the political class, particularly Congressional representatives, and business owners, mainly but not limited to business owners of Nicaraguan origin. She has a roster of volunteers who trust the organization well enough as to assist in many ways. Sandigo mentions that the limited government funding the organization receives from Miami-Dade County (Department of Public Housing and Community Development), is for its role in providing assistance to about 200 persons, based on economic needs. She explains: “Our budget does not include the costs related to the assistance we provide to children who are citizens and whose parents face deportation and other immigration-related problems; nor does it cover our assistance to the immigrant children who have been entering the country recently. Our services to all of them are free.”

The proximity and loyalty to the leader is a major characteristic of those involved in everyday life operations and systematic voluntary activities as donors. Among those who assist in the efforts are Sandigo’s husband and their two young daughters, her personal assistant Urania Averruz, of whom Sandigo often says “has been with us for more than twenty years,” a group of attorneys who work pro bono with the immigrants she refers or for class action suits they have launched against more than one administration. She has also worked with several organizations in Miami and other states, prominently Unidad Hondureña when late Jose Lagos, a key local activist during the movement leading to NACARA and its immediate aftermath, ran it.

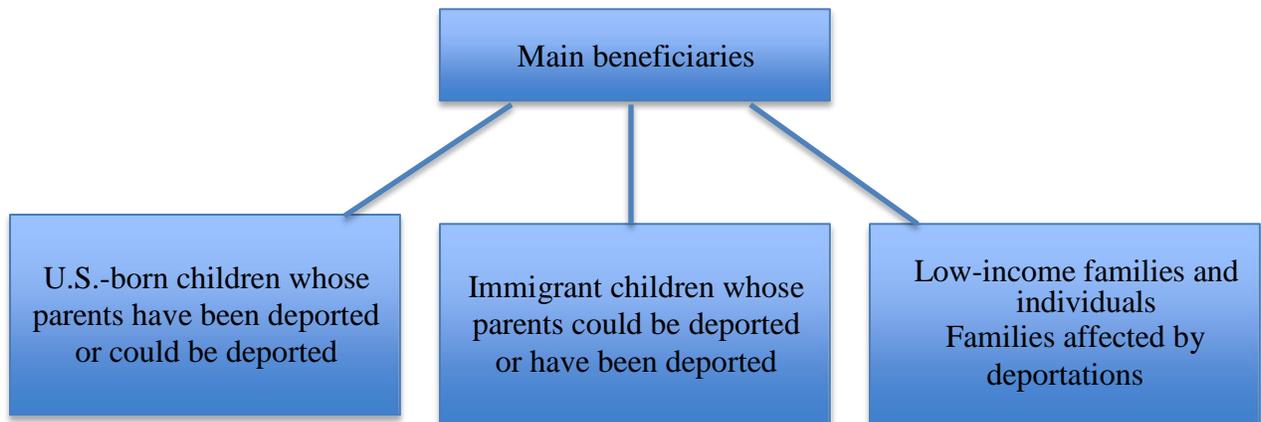
American Fraternity, then Nicaraguan Fraternity, was founded by Pablo Antonio Vega, a Catholic Bishop, Haydee Marin, and Nora Sandigo. Since its origins, the organization has relied on volunteers who have been committed to civic activism, the development of networks and the creation of partnerships with other organizations to advance their common goals. A key volunteer at the beginning was attorney Stephanie Murphy, Sandigo mentions, as she praises her services: “she worked for countless hours to assist the organization and the community.” Sergio Massa, the president of the National Coalition of Peruvian organizations has been a key partner also, together with Emma Lozano of *Somos Un Pueblo*, from Chicago, and Jose Sandoval from *Voluntarios de la Comunidad* in California. One of the organization’s directors, Onofre Gutierrez, works with Catholic volunteers from Virginia, Maryland, and Washington. Lucy Monje, represents the organization in Atlanta. Attorney Alfonso Oviedo, who is a long-term member of the organization and its current President, attorneys Michael Feldenkrais, Irvin Gonzalez, and Donald Schlemmer systematically assist American Fraternity. The following figure (Figure 3) illustrates the current structure of American Fraternity.

Figure 3. Current Structure of American Fraternity



The main beneficiaries of American Fraternity are predominately made up of U.S.-born children and immigrant children whose parents have been deported or are subject to deportation, unaccompanied immigrant minors, and low-income immigrant families.

Figure 4. Main beneficiaries of the Organization



Nora Sandigo, the leader of the American Fraternity, emphasizes the role of her Christian perspective, which she puts forward as she explains why, ultimately, the children and their families are not alone nor is she or her organization alone in the pathway toward the realization of their just cause. In a recent conversation with her, she explained how her Christian faith has made a difference in the strength with which she has approached tasks of great challenges:

I hope that religious groups of any denominations continue to understand even more so now the veritable teachings of our sacred Bible: humanism, love, a religious spirit, goodness, compassion, protection to the needy ones, bread for the hungry ones, hospitality for the immigrant and the mandate to serve all and any of us who may be in need of help. The brothers and sisters who are in need are too many, and if we have not served them yet, we should bear in mind that our Lord always gives us an opportunity to serve and to be better persons each day. As a new morning full of joy starts, we shall start giving love with Christian fervor. Let's demonstrate our gratitude to the Lord for our health, family, jobs, and all the blessings that He gives us every day without forgetting our brothers and sisters. With faith in God and perseverance we will achieve our goals, we will overcome

any obstacle. Let's keep moving ahead that with the love of God, nothing is impossible!²²

Religious people from different faiths and non-religious persons have backed Sandigo and support her endeavors because they are convinced that what she is doing makes a difference where it matters the most: the community. Her actions have stopped deportations; she has created a network of assistance and protection for hundreds of families and individuals which relies for the most part on volunteers. As American Fraternity strategizes to achieve large-scale goals, such as having the Supreme Court listen to the children on deportation matters, the leader of the organization does not mind spending a week fighting for the halt of the deportation of a single individual, joining his or her relatives in a hunger strike or visiting detention centers as many times as necessary.

The three basic principles upon which the organization's goals are established are stated in the mission page of its website:

Our mission is to serve and educate the local and national community of immigrants by helping them integrate and adjust to American society, culture and legal processes. We seek to empower people by making them aware of their rights and duties, equipping them to become active members of their communities in order to help create a better tomorrow at the local, national and international levels. We seek to help spread a message and a purpose of equality and justice for all.²³

In recent years, a series of policy U.S. initiatives have been put in practice with the goal of tracking down and deporting undocumented migrants; Operation Streamline, Secure Communities, the Alien Transfer and Exit Program, make up a few of these initiatives which have induced fear and stress among undocumented immigrants, their relatives and friends; and

among minors who hear stories about deportations and notice their family members, neighbors, and classmates begging to disappear.

Within this context, since the year 2009, American Fraternity has focused on the protection of a special kind of separated child (one whose parent or both parents have been deported or are on the verge of deportation) by assuming legal custody. In the summer of 2014, *The Washington Post* released a front-page extensive report on the organization. In the newspaper report, which they titled “A Band-Aid for 800 Children,” referring to the parental deportation, Elli Saslow writes, “Sandigo is Miami most popular solution” to this problem:

Many [children] leave the country with their parents. Seventeen each day are referred to the U.S. foster-care system. Others seek out new guardians, American citizens such as Sandigo, to protect their legal interests in the United States. For these children, the arrangement means they can stay in the country where they were born and continue to live with relatives or friends who are in the country illegally, without fear of being taken into custody

... For Sandigo, it means the file cabinets of her small office are now stuffed with birth certificates, baby pictures, Social Security cards, passports and notarized forms for 812 children living in 14 states, ranging in age from 9 months to 17 years... She does this as a volunteer and often at her own expense, not because she considers herself capable of providing a safety net for 812 children but because no one else does it.²⁴

Based on American Fraternity’s records, the executive director provides the following information stemming from a sample of 500 of the more than 800 cases that she currently has under her supervision:

Female: 58%

Male: 42 %

0 to 4 years of age: 28%

5 to 12: 38 %

13 to 18: 34 %

Most children are below 18 years of age but some have reached that age under her custody. Most cases are from Mexico and Honduras (17% and 16% respectively), followed by El Salvador (14%), Guatemala (12%), and Nicaragua (7%).

Nora Sandigo's recent goals include having these children narrate their stories to judges on the city and state level, and before the U.S. Supreme Court if possible. She is concerned that many American children have been denied access to the legal system. These children, Sandigo emphasizes are protected by their Government and its Constitution. She urges immigration authorities to stop the raids and the deportations, and Congress to pass Immigration Reform.

The parents interviewed for this report showed a pattern of fear that was cyclical: fear for their children's safety and their own in their homeland, fear of not being able to provide economically for them and the elderly or those facing critical health conditions in their family. Then, once they reach the United States, they find a more favorable environment, a more orderly society, and greater protection based on the rule of law. Yet fear does not disappear, it acquires new dimensions: fear of deportation and a new cycle of economic insecurity that can only be ameliorated in their minds when contrasted with the much worse economic and social situations and prospects they faced back home. Within the new context, however, they face economic hardships, which have become more burdensome for those whose spouses have been deported, and many of them would remain at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder.

American Fraternity enters into this scenario of broken families with little hope as a provider of guidance, emotional and to some extent material support, and with the reassurance that there is hope; that something can be done. American Fraternity is a drop of hope for these families within the ocean of despair that has consumed them throughout most of their life.

Sandigo prepares papers, calls her contacts, some of whom are experienced immigration attorneys, and advocates for these families.

She brings tens of families at a time, several times a year to her house to have family picnics to enable the formation of a network of support among them, distribute some assistance, and to share moments of solace knowing that they are not alone. The smiles of their children as they gather their candies and toys, is worth the effort, Nora Sandigo comments.

Possibly, the children would soon forget about the “big patio” full of balloons at the picnic, but maybe not. What is certain is that they are enjoying the gathering, their childhood and their truncated happiness. Little do they know about the fact that that woman that is calling on their own moms or other relatives with microphone in hand to distribute boxes full of cereals and other food, will be traveling to Washington in a couple of days to tell powerful people there that they should listen to their stories, and that they deserve to finally have the stability their parents have worked so hard to achieve.

Sample of Goals and Accomplishments by American Fraternity

1989 to 1997: Nora Sandigo and members of her organization establish a lobby in the State Legislature, the U.S. Congress, and the White House for the approval of a relief act for Central America. The efforts of Nicaraguan Fraternity together with the efforts of other social actors such as activists and Congressional representatives, who worked from Miami and other areas of the United States, were a critical part of the forces that lead to the passage of NACARA.

1996 to 1997: American Fraternity and other community-based organizations in Miami advocate for changes in immigration law, with an emphasis on the protection of thousands of Nicaraguans

and other Central Americans who face deportation. The *Nora Sandigo v. William Clinton* suit is prepared and presented in Court. The case was eventually dropped since NACARA passed in 1997.

1997 to 1998: American Fraternity gets involved in the movement for the adjudication of the Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for the benefit of Hondurans and Nicaraguans. The concerted efforts of several groups and influential actors, including government representatives, had an impact, and TPS was eventually adjudicated.

2000 to Present:

- Support for the Dream Act and involvement in the lobbies of activists who favored the signature of free trade agreements with Central America, Colombia, and Peru.

2009- Present: American Fraternity's systematic involvement in several aspects of community activism, with a focus on immigrant families at risk, in relation to deportation. AF's involvement includes direct assistance to families, protecting children whose family members have been deported or are subject to deportation by becoming legal guardian of over 800 children in different states of the United States. The leader of the organization, Nora Sandigo, visits hundreds of children and family members, listens to them, and delivers assistance. She works with a team of volunteers, as they advance the goals of the organization.

- American Fraternity has organized several marches in Washington since the 1990s, including a recent one, with a group of U.S. citizen children for a Children's March. The goal of the most recent march is explained by Sandigo as follows: "The goal was for them to petition President Obama to stop raids and deportations until Congress grants a full and comprehensive immigration reform. Together they stood strong in our nation's capital, fighting for their civil and human rights while also representing their parents whom have been deported or arrested."²⁵

She adds:

Children should take priority before the implementation of any legislation that could potentially hinder the development of children according to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Right now we are working on a campaign called 'Don't Leave Me Alone' and more information can be found. According to Immigration reports, 17 children end up in the hands of state agencies every day, and the youngest ones end up in State custody, and they are eventually placed in adoption. We struggle to rescue children from potentially harmful situations and have offered custody to those in need.²⁶

Notes

¹ The author of this report has conducted extensive research on immigration issues and immigrant groups and particularly Nicaraguans in South Florida; she is currently working on a book manuscript on this topic.

² Data from the United States Border Patrol, FY 2011 and FY 2013. (Oct 1st through Sept. 30th).

³ UNHCR, Regional Office for the United States and the Caribbean. "Children on the Run: Unaccompanied Children leaving Central America and Mexico and the Need for International Protection." (March 2014): 4.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ UNHCR data. "Unaccompanied Children from Central America and Mexico and the Need for Protection." (March 12, 2014). Retrieved from: <http://www.unhcrwashington.org/children/read-more>

⁶ Shifter, Michael. President, Inter-American Dialogue. *Countering Criminal Violence in Central America*. Council on Foreign Relations, Special Report. (April 2012).

⁷ Hiller, Lucy. Save the Children UK. "Children on the Move: Protecting Unaccompanied Migrant Children in South Africa and the Region." (2007).

⁸ International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the International Rescue Committee, Save the Children, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and World Vision. "Inter-Agency Guiding Principles on Unaccompanied and Separated Children." International Committee of the Red Cross. (January 2014).

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Chauduri et al. 2010. *Facing Our Future, Children in the Aftermath of Immigration Enforcement*. Washington D.C.: The Urban Institute.

¹¹ Brabeck, Kalina. et al. *The Psychological Impact of Detention and Deportation on U.S. Migrant Children and Families: A Report for the Inter-American Court of Human Rights*. (August 2013). Citing the following sources respectively: Jeffrey Passel and D'Vera Cohn. *Unauthorized Immigrant Population: National and State Trends*. Washington: Pew Research Center. (2011). Capps et al. (2013). *A Demographic, Socioeconomic and Health Coverage Profile of Unauthorized Immigrants in the United States*, Washington D.C: Migration Policy Institute; Wessler S. (2012) *Primary Data: Deportations of Parents of U.S. Citizen kids*. Colorlines.com

¹² Foley, Elsie. "Deportation Separated Thousands Of U.S.-Born Children From Parents In 2013." *Huffington Post*. (June 2014).

¹³ Graphic synthesis of information from: Chauduri et al. (2010) and Brabeck et al. (2013). The Urban Institute, Washington D.C; Capps et al. (2013). *A Demographic, Socioeconomic and Health Coverage Profile of Unauthorized Immigrants in the United States*. Washington D.C: Migration Policy Institute; Wessler S. (2012). *Primary Data: Deportations of Parents of U.S. Citizen kids*. Colorlines.com

¹⁴ Colorlines.com. "Deportations of Parents of U.S.-Born Citizens 12/2012." (Dec 14, 2012). Retrieved from: http://www.scribd.com/doc/116875649/Deportations-of-Parents-of-U-S-Born-Citizens-12-2012?secret_password=2alzgcasiwglnk94xcpl

¹⁵ De Tocqueville, Alex. "An excerpt from Democracy in America." Edited, translated and with an introduction by Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop. Retrieved from: <http://press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/805328.html>

¹⁶ De Tocqueville, Alex. *Democracy in America*. (1833).

¹⁷ Pyykkönen, Miikka. "Associations in Finland Integrating Governmentality: Administrative Expectations for Immigrant." *Global, Local, Political*, 32. (2007): 197-224.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Save the Children. (2007): 24.

²⁰ The Sandinista government was defeated in the elections of 1990.

²¹ Recorded Interview with Nora Sandigo. Miami. June 22, 2009.

²² Nora Sandigo, American Fraternity. Personal communication. July 15, 2014. Translation from Spanish by the author.

²³ American Fraternity Website (July 2014): <http://www.americanfraternity.org/english/index-2.html>

²⁴ Saslow, Eli. "A Band-Aid' for 800 Children." *The Washington Post*. (July 5, 2014). [Page 2 electronic version]. Retrieved from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/national/2014/07/05/a-band-aid-for-800-children/>

²⁵ Interview with Nora Sandigo, July 25th, 2014. Some of the information provided by the leader of the organization was received as part of follow-ups to the interviews, which were received via email.

²⁶ Ibid.