



## FIRST FOCUS

CAMPAIGN FOR CHILDREN

July 10, 2013

Dear Member of Congress;

I'm writing on behalf of First Focus Campaign for Children (FFCC) to express our concerns with the Strengthen and Fortify Enforcement (SAFE) Act (H.R.2278). FFCC is a national bipartisan organization whose mission is to make children and families a priority in federal policy and budget decisions. We are also dedicated to the passage of immigration reform that protects the needs and interests of America's children.

As an organization that focuses on the broad range of cross-cutting policy issues that affect children, we have a unique understanding of the negative effects of the SAFE Act on child well-being, including children's health, educational outcomes, and economic stability. Children of immigrants comprise roughly 1 in 4 of all children in the U.S. and 4.5 million U.S. citizen children currently live with at least one undocumented parent; therefore, the SAFE Act has the potential to harm a significant and rapidly growing segment of the U.S. child population. The extreme enforcement provisions proposed in the SAFE Act, including the expansion of state authority over immigration enforcement, would further exacerbate the often unintended but serious consequences to children and families, including the separation from a parent. In FY 2012 alone, 88,517 parents of U.S. citizen children were removed, meaning that roughly 152,000 U.S. citizen children had at least one parent who was removed from the U.S.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, between 2010 and 2012 roughly 205,000 parents of U.S. citizen children were removed, reflecting 23 percent of all removals during that period.<sup>2</sup> The SAFE Act threatens to separate more U.S. citizen children from their parents through increased deportations, lengthier detentions, as well as reduced ability for ICE to exercise discretion in order to maintain family unity or promote child well-being, such as through implementation of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program.

Research has consistently demonstrated that separation from a parent due to immigration enforcement measures has devastating short-term and long-term outcomes for children. For example, a recent study by Human Impact Partners (HIP) shows that as a result of separation from their parents or the fear of separation, children with undocumented parents report higher rates of anxiety, fear, sadness, and symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The HIP report estimates that in the next year, roughly 43,000 U.S. citizen children will experience a decline in health as a result of the deportation of a primary caregiver, while another 100,000 children will suffer from withdrawal after a parent's arrest if current immigration enforcement levels are maintained. The SAFE Act would result in a much larger negative impact by actually *increasing* enforcement measures, particularly through the expansion of the 287(g) program. We should be promoting and valuing families rather than ripping them apart.

Extensive interior enforcement like that proposed in the SAFE Act also harms children's educational outcomes and access to basic needs, such as health care. Children with undocumented parents are less likely to have affordable health insurance and often miss school and change schools more often than their peers, usually due to the instability created by oppressive levels of immigration enforcement.<sup>3</sup> For example, the day immediately following the implementation of Alabama's state law H.B.56, which required schools to document the immigration status of their students and that of their parents, roughly 2,000 students were absent from school, and many of those children never returned.<sup>4</sup> Absenteeism and abrupt changes in schools both

negatively affect the ability to concentrate, thereby affecting academic performance and increasing the risk of dropping out. We should be providing a strong education to all America's children if we want a strong and prosperous future.

The enforcement provisions in the SAFE Act would also negatively impact the economic well-being of children and families. Research shows that the sudden decrease in family income due to the detention or deportation of a parent leads to housing instability, crowded housing, and increased reliance on nutrition assistance.<sup>5</sup> In fact, the HIP report estimates that 83,000 families risk falling into poverty in the next year due to the detention or deportation of a primary earner.<sup>6</sup> With child poverty already at near record highs, Congress should be focused on policies that decrease child poverty, rather than those that have the potential to create economic instability for millions of children.

In addition to detrimental child well-being outcomes, immigration enforcement also has a negative impact on the communities that children live in—including the schools, churches, hospitals, and basic need programs that serve children every day. The SAFE Act puts clergy members, teachers, and service providers at risk of facing possible criminal penalties for “harboring” individuals they may know are unlawfully present, thereby tying the hands of those who play a critical role in protecting our children. For example, recent estimates show that approximately 5,000 children with a detained or removed parent are living in foster care.<sup>7</sup> To prevent social workers from ensuring the safety and well-being of children in their care runs contrary to the very mission of the U.S. child welfare system, which is to protect children and promote family unity. The SAFE Act also threatens community safety by creating distrust among immigrant communities of local law enforcement. Children with undocumented parents grow up afraid of the police, decreasing the likelihood that they will contact authorities to report a crime.<sup>8</sup> When immigration enforcement spreads in a community, it leads to fewer people leaving their house, lower school attendance, and more missed days of work. When families are forced into poverty, the entire community suffers. Communities cannot thrive when their residents live with such high levels of uncertainty, and children cannot succeed when they live in fear.

As an organization committed to our nation's children, we urge you to reject the SAFE Act and similar proposals and instead work to build an immigration system that protects our American family values.

Sincerely,



Bruce Lesley  
President

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<sup>1</sup> Human Impact Partners. June 2013. *Family Unity, Family Health: How Family-Focused Immigration Reform Will Mean Better Health for Children and Families*. Oakland, CA. Available: <http://www.humanimpact.org/component/jdownloads/finish/7/304>.

<sup>2</sup> Wessler, S. Colorlines, December 2012. *Nearly 205K Deportations of Parents of U.S. Citizens in Just Over Two Years*. Available: [http://colorlines.com/archives/2012/12/us\\_deports\\_more\\_than\\_200k\\_parents.html](http://colorlines.com/archives/2012/12/us_deports_more_than_200k_parents.html).

<sup>3</sup> Human Impact Partners, June 2013

<sup>4</sup> Lee, M.J. Politico, November 2011. *Alabama Hispanic Students Not Coming Back*. Available: <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/1111/67438.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Chaudry A, Capps R, Pedroza JM, Castaneda RM, Santos R, Scott MM. *Facing our Future: Children in the Aftermath of Immigration Enforcement*. The Urban Institute; 2010. Available: <http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/recordDetail?accno=ED508226>.

<sup>6</sup> Human Impact Partners, June 2013

<sup>7</sup> Wessler, S. Applied Research Center, 2011. *Shattered Families: The Perilous Intersection of Immigration Enforcement and the Child Welfare System*. Available <http://arc.org/shatteredfamilies>.

<sup>8</sup> Dreby J. Center for American Progress; 2012. *How today's immigration Enforcement Policies Impact Children, Families, And Communities: A View From The Ground*. Available at: [http://www.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2\\_012/08/DrebyImmigrationFamiliesFINAL.pdf](http://www.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2_012/08/DrebyImmigrationFamiliesFINAL.pdf).