

DESERET Morning News

Seeking a better life

Deported: Stealing identity carries a high price

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Life and the border / La vida y la frontera

The Deseret Morning News begins a three-part series today on immigration, legal and illegal. The series explores immigration's impact on the lives of people in both the United States and Mexico, as well as the resulting interdependence of the two nations' economies.

ZACATECAS, Mexico — Maricela Naranjo's two youngest children are dressed in crisp white clothing, playing in the pews just before their baptisms.

It should be a joyful occasion. But as she watches them peeking over benches in the small Catholic church, Naranjo's eyes well up with tears. Today, her family is together. She knows it's only a temporary reprieve.

"I need to wait — I don't know for how long," says Naranjo, who after spending much of her adult life in Wendover, was deported from Nevada after pleading guilty to identity theft. "I don't want to stay here."

Her husband, Jaime Naranjo, and the couple's three children are all native-born U.S. citizens. But she crossed the border from Mexico to the United States illegally and needed falsified documents to work.

She was one of the unlucky undocumented workers who got caught. After her conviction, she turned herself in to immigration authorities for deportation as part of an agreement to avoid jail time.

Her story isn't uncommon. Thousands of mixed-status families have some members who are U.S. citizens or permanent residents and others who have no legal status.

As Congress stalls in trying to resolve the nation's immigration woes, the Department of Homeland Security estimates that the undocumented immigrant population in the United States grew by an average 408,000 each year from 2000 to 2004. The flow continues, as people seeking a better life are lured by the promise of better jobs and a brighter future for their children.

Unwitting victims

Maricela Naranjo is no different. Raised in rural Zacatecas, she grew up sharing one bedroom with her parents and siblings. She crossed the border when she was 19, hoping to help herself and her family improve their lives. She later met Jaime.

It was after her son Jaime Jr. was born that she purchased the name, Social Security number and birthday of Yvonne Carrasco from a document vendor because she needed to work to support her son.

She knew it was against the law, but she had no idea that years later, it would lead to complications for another mother nearly 800 miles away in Tulare County, Calif.

That woman, the real Yvonne Carrasco, has lived her entire life in rural Tulare County where she lives in a one-room shed-like building in the back yard of her boyfriend's mother's home

Carrasco doesn't know whose unpaid doctor bill cost her a chance at receiving public assistance for housing, because Naranjo is just one of at least four people who have used her identity.

As she sits on one of two beds in the cramped room that she shares with her boyfriend and two of her three children, Carrasco does know that she's never been to Reno, Nev., where a \$411 unpaid podiatry bill apparently ruined her family's chance of moving to more spacious quarters earlier this year.

When her three-year wait for public housing assistance was finally up, Carrasco submitted applications to four places and failed to get into any of them. By the time she realized the podiatry bill was the hold-up, it was too late. Her 60 days to use the public assistance had passed.

"I want my own place so bad, I'd make sure to pay my rent, my bills," she says, shrugging. "They probably figured I was a high credit risk and wouldn't pay the rent."

A study released last year by the University of California's Center for the Study of Urban Poverty found that more than three-quarters of the nation's 117,000 day laborers are undocumented. However, that's only a small fraction of the nation's estimated 12 million undocumented immigrants.

In order to get around their lack of documentation, many unauthorized workers will start their own self-employed business or purchase a Social Security number.

In Carrasco's case, an entire identity was stolen. That was also the case in Utah when immigration agents arrested 145 people last December at a Hyrum meat-packing plant as part of an identity theft investigation that netted 1,282 arrests in five states.

A different kind of theft

Virginia Kice, spokeswoman for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, says theft of entire identities is becoming increasingly common, and it's a new trend. Traditionally, document vendors simply have made up a Social Security number, which may or may not match an actual person.

The Social Security Administration did a database check in 2000 and discovered that about 132,000 Utahns had Social Security numbers that had been compromised, says Richard Hamp, Utah's assistant attorney general who prosecutes identity-theft cases.

Carrasco first discovered her identity had been stolen last year when she filed her tax return, after moving from welfare to work. She earned \$5,710 at a retail job and was due a refund of \$2,758 — or so she thought. Instead of the refund, she got a letter from the Internal Revenue Service saying she owed back taxes. The IRS showed Carrasco owing \$4,143 for \$55,266 in earnings in just one year.

"I was shocked," she says. "I didn't know what they were talking about. I wasn't working all those years. I was receiving welfare."

Carrasco says she never really thought about illegal immigration until her identity was stolen. "I know they can't issue me a new Social Security number, but something should come up to clear up victims," she says.

Back in Mexico, Naranjo knows what she did is wrong. Even so, as she sits on a bed in a room with pink plaster walls, she wonders if being split apart from her family is too harsh a punishment.

"Before I married my husband, I lived by myself with my son," she says. "That's why we look for something to work. We need to work. We need to bring some food."

Her two youngest children are staying with her at her parents' home in the rural community of Francisco Murgia, south of the city of Zacatecas. Her 12-year-old son, Jaime Jr., attends school in West Wendover, Nev.

After Naranjo's husband, Jaime, spent a week in Mexico, he returned to the couple's home in West Wendover, where he's struggling to work to support her in Mexico. After spending the summer with his mother, Jaime Jr. is back with his father for school.

Thinking of Jaime Jr. makes Maricela Naranjo the saddest. "It is very hard," she says. He understands some Spanish but isn't fluent, and he's afraid that if he went to school in Mexico, he wouldn't fit in.

Outside the system

In the afternoon, family and friends attend a party celebrating the baptism in Francisco Murgia, where Maricela Naranjo's father, Miguel Rodriguez, says, in Spanish, that his daughter is being unfairly punished for simply trying to support her family.

"She shouldn't be criminalized," he says. "She didn't rob, she didn't kill."

She shares a bedroom here with her children in the small brick and adobe home, adjacent to a small cactus farm. The town has only dirt roads, and few homes have phones.

Boxes filled with clothing and other supplies for the children sit in the corner, which her husband brought from Salt Lake City, where such products are cheaper.

Meanwhile, Jaime Naranjo is struggling to earn enough money to support two households. He's an assistant laundry manager, earning about \$2,000 a month, after taxes and insurance. About \$400 goes to his wife. The rest, he says, goes to the couple's mortgage on a home they purchased in Wendover, and basic necessities.

Her father believes that his daughter, who he says never racked up a bad credit rating, actually helped Carrasco by putting money in her Social Security account.

However, the system doesn't work that way, says Hamp, the assistant attorney general. When Social Security earnings don't match exactly the information for the Social Security number's holder, the credit goes into a separate file.

And even if Maricela Naranjo did pay her bills, at least one person using Yvonne Carrasco's identity didn't.

Carrasco says the identity theft has cost her chances at obtaining a credit card, buying a car and moving her family to a better place. She even wonders, in retrospect, if she's been turned down for employment opportunities because of it. Her oldest daughter is living with grandparents because of the cramped living conditions in the studio where Carrasco has been for the past eight years.

"I feel like I'm missing out," she says.

Few options

As her son, Julian Gonzalez Jr., 11, quizzes his sister, 5-year-old Jizelle Analla, with alphabet cards, Carrasco ponders future opportunities of moving. Her only income now is from food stamps, and she is hoping that her boyfriend will eventually find more regular employment than the farm work he does and that she can find reliable transportation so she can get a job, too.

She's also looking at new housing opportunities — possibly self-help housing in which low-income individuals help build their own homes, or getting back on the waiting list for public assistance.

In rural Zacatecas, meanwhile, Maricela Naranjo longs for a different sort of reprieve. She sees little hope for her family to all be together, at least not legally.

Since she's been deported, she can't re-enter the country legally for 10 years, even though her husband is a U.S. citizen, unless she can qualify for a waiver.

The couple opted not to take the risk of Jaime Naranjo sponsoring Maricela for immigration, because they feared she wouldn't be able to obtain that waiver, which requires showing an applicant's absence would cause an immediate family member, with legal status, to suffer severe hardship.

Now, she shakes her head at the prospect of having to illegally cross a border again. Her husband is equally frustrated at not knowing when his family will be reunited. Before the visit to Zacatecas, Jaime Jr. cried, saying he wanted to spend time with his mother.

Jaime Naranjo has heard little in the efforts in Congress that would help his family. The failed Senate bill would have only given those currently living in the United States illegally a chance at legal status. And the immigration attorneys he has consulted have offered little hope.

"They should consider us having a family, having a house, and doing good," he says. "We have to hope that there's

a better future for us than this."

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