

# News

## Americans in Mixed-status Families Cope with Toll of Deportation

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AP National Writer

BOCA DEL RÍO, Mexico — It's almost as if Letty Stegall is back home in the United States, beside her daughter to wake her for school, fussing over the list when her husband goes shopping, beaming when she sees what her family has managed to cook for dinner.

But Stegall's face only appears on a screen, her words over the phone and in a barrage of texts. Lives once lived together are split by 1,600 miles. A woman who married an American and gave birth to an American and who came to think of herself as American, too, is now deported to her native Mexico.

"I lost everything," she says. "It's just me."

As the United States takes a harder line on immigration, thousands who called the country home are being forced to go. Often, they leave



In this May 24, 2018 photo, Jennifer Tadeo-Uscanga, 17, and her stepdad, Steve Stegall, stand outside the Kansas City, Mo., home they shared with wife and mother Letty Stegall. Stegall, who lived in the United States for 20 years, was deported back to Mexico in March, leaving the pair to fill the void left by her absence.

behind spouses and children with American citizenship and must figure out how to go on with families fractured apart.

Studies have found an estimated 8 million to 9 million Americans — the majority of them children — live with at least one relative who is in the country illegally, and so each action to deport an

immigrant is just as likely to entangle a citizen or legal U.S. resident.

Stegall was 21 when she paid a smuggler to take her across the Rio Grande in 1999. She settled around Kansas City, Missouri, and over time, her fear of being caught receded. Then six years ago, police pulled her over and charged

her with misdemeanor drunken driving. The arrest made authorities aware she was in the U.S. illegally and plunged her case into the immigration system.

By then, Stegall was divorced from her first husband, with whom she had a daughter, and was dating Steve Stegall, a native of Kansas City whom she married later that same year. She never applied for a green card because her former attorney told her she had little to worry about with a citizen husband and child and because, under U.S. law, she likely would have had to return to Mexico and wait out the process there.

Barack Obama was still president when Stegall received a deportation order, and like many at that time, she was allowed to stay in the U.S. while she made regular check-ins with Immigration and Customs Enforcement. An exec-

utive order issued by President Donald Trump changed ICE's direction, effectively declaring any immigrant without legal status subject to arrest. Even the path once seen as simplest to legal status — marriage to a citizen — no longer is always enough to stave off deportation.

On Feb. 26, as Stegall backed out of her driveway to head to the gym, three cars careened in and agents arrested her. Four days later, she was shackled aboard a plane and headed back to Mexico.

While ICE often touts the criminal convictions of those it picks up, arrests for convictions like driving under the influence (59,985 in fiscal year 2017) outnumber those of immigrants previously convicted for homicide, sexual assault or kidnapping. (Those collectively totaled 6,553 in 2017.) Meantime, arrests of immigrants without crim-

inal convictions have increased since Trump took office.

"The murderers are still there. The gangsters are still there. The rapists are still there," says Stegall, 41.

Stegall's deportation means she could be banned from the U.S. for a decade. She prays paperwork seeking to validate her return through her marriage could wind through the system within two years.

Back in Kansas City, her husband, Steve, and 17-year-old daughter, Jennifer Tadeo-Uscanga, are lumbering along without her. Dinners, once an ever-changing parade of feasts that charmed the palates of Steve and Jennifer, have become spartan affairs. Plants wilted and died, and clothes came out of the wash tinged in blue. Celebrations now typically include tears.

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