

Young immigrants fear loss of the American dream

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The United States was an inspirational place for Karla Estrada Sanchez's parents, but she is starting to wonder whether the American dream could be turning into a nightmare for herself and other young immigrants.

"My parents have always told (us) opportunities are anywhere. They brought us to this country because it was supposedly the land of opportunity," said Estrada, 26, of Los Angeles. "But if we find opportunity in another place, our country is wherever our feet take us," she said.

Estrada, a participant in former President Barack Obama's Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, which provides deportation relief and work permits to immigrants who were brought here as children, is one of many young immigrants who are contemplating leaving the country. They are worried about their future here as President Donald Trump's administration ramps up deportation efforts and has recently proposed limiting legal immigration.

Immigration arrests increased by nearly 40 percent in early 2017 as agents — emboldened by Trump's pledge to build a border wall and deport criminals — detained more than 40,000 people suspected of being in the country illegally.

Under current White House policy, any immigrant living illegally in the U.S. who has been charged or convicted of any crime, or even suspected of committing a crime, is now an enforcement priority.

And, the Obama-era DACA program that has granted thousands of young immigrants the opportunity to go to college, buy homes and pursue promising careers, is at risk of being repealed. Trump has given mixed signals on whether or not he plans to end DACA.

Immediately deporting approximately 750,000 DACA recipients would cost the federal government more than \$60 billion, along with a \$280 billion reduction in economic growth over the next decade, according to The Cato Institute, a Libertarian public policy research organization.

Because of this uncertainty, DACA beneficiaries are thinking about leaving the U.S. They fear that if they remain, they could lose their permission to work or end up at risk of deportation.

Alma Cruz, a DACA recipient who works as an outreach coordinator for United Way, has a backup plan. Cruz, a Mexican native, is looking to move there, buy land, and go into the real estate business.

Estrada, a UCLA-grad graduate, wants to study international law and is seeking universities in other countries.

“It’s unfortunate, because this country is going to lose a lot of young professionals ... not only DACA recipients,” Estrada said.

As Donald Graham, cofounder of The Dream.US, an organization that provides scholarships to undocumented students, phrased it, DACA recipients are “an extraordinary group.”

“You have to want them in this country,” he said earlier this year. “And it’s my hope that we will.”

Rep. Luis V. Gutiérrez, D-Ill., warned DACA recipients July 12 to “prepare for the worst.”

A group of attorneys general in a June 29 letter called on the Trump administration to phase out the program. Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton and others have threatened to amend a district court case to challenge the DACA program unless the Trump administration acts to phase it out.

Days later in a closed door meeting, then-U.S. Department of Homeland Security Secretary John Kelly told Gutiérrez and other Democratic members of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus that the program, which has provided work permits and deportation relief to about 800,000 undocumented immigrants, was likely illegal.

The way Gutiérrez sees it, the new White House administration wants to make DACA recipients and other immigrants lose their legal status “so that they can be deported.”

Anti-illegal immigration advocates have long opposed it and are fighting for its repeal.

The Federation for American Immigration Reform, a Washington, D.C.-based group that advocates stopping illegal immigration, sees it as a form of amnesty, because the program allows people who don’t have proper documentation to remain in the country.

Rep. Ken Calvert, R-California, said Obama “overstepped his executive authority when he single-handedly adjusted legal status for a group of people.”

“The only way our country and affected individuals can have long-term certainty is by Congress changing our immigration laws,” Calvert said.

It may have been a farfetched idea at first, but a trip to Mexico convinced Cruz that moving back to her native country wasn’t such a bad idea.

Cruz, originally from Oaxaca, can travel outside the U.S. through advance parole, an immigration provision available to DACA recipients that allows them to leave and enter the country.

Advance parole, she said, has allowed many like her to experience their home countries, which they have not seen since being brought here as kids. Now, she plans to invest in real estate in Mexico. She envisions renting out apartments that sit atop small convenience stores.

In early July, she posted about her plans in a Facebook group devoted to DACA immigrants.

“Being in Mexico, I kinda ... want to move back,” she wrote. “Ya sabemos inglés (We already know English), let’s move forward. Anyone feel the same?” she wrote.

Nearly 100 comments followed.

“If DACA goes away we must continue to dream big in our home countries or other countries,” one person wrote.

“I’ve been thinking about it more and more. I am well-educated and talented but I feel like I’ve just hit a wall with what I can do with my life here,” another said.

As for Cruz, of North Carolina, she plans to return to the U.S. from her trip to Mexico and continue making plans to buy land to move back. For now, she wants to see how the new “Dream Act” legislation fares. It would grant permanent legal status to more than 1 million people who arrived in the U.S. before they turned 18.

Estrada has been exploring her options.

She wants to study international law in human rights. She’s looking into universities in Canada, Belgium, and New Zealand — countries where she can study law in English.

She’s been contemplating this idea for some time, but it didn’t seem like a reality. Things are different now.

Her parents, who were undocumented immigrants, moved back to Mexico earlier this year. She said they were undergoing anxiety with the new White House administration.

“I have nothing and nobody tying me to this country,” said Estrada.

To Estrada, leaving the U.S. doesn’t mean she’s giving up. Instead, it’s a way to validate the sacrifices her parents made when they left Mexico to provide a better life for their children.

“Not trying to accomplish my potential as a professional, it’s not fair for my parents and it’s not fair to me,” she said. The Associated Press contributed to this report.