

The Red & Black

OPINION: Athens should not be a place of fear for undocumented immigrants

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The “No Mas Mentiras, No Mas Deportaciones” rally on Jan. 19 at Athens City Hall more closely resembled a celebration than a protest. Organized by Dignidad Immigrante in Athens, the rally featured singing, poetry, music and heartfelt speeches – it brought together people of different languages and different cultures. The togetherness of the rally contradicted harshly with the inspiration: the U.S. Department Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) tears families and communities apart through deportation.

According to the Department of Homeland Security’s Feb. 20, 2017 statement, “Enforcement of the Immigration Laws to Serve the National Interest,” ICE agents remove undocumented immigrants if they act unlawfully or if, according to “the judgement of an immigration officer, [they] otherwise pose a risk to the public safety or national security.”

The vagueness of these standards leaves a lot of room for interpretation, of which ICE agents take advantage. Unlawful activities can be as minor as missing a stoplight or driving with a headlight out. To phrase this another way: families can be separated due to traffic violations. Furthermore, the status of undocumented immigrants relying on “the judgement of an immigration officer” allows for racism and prejudice to decide the fate of individuals, rather than objective actions and proven risk.

Research doesn’t prove that immigrants are a risk to the country. Pew Research Center reports: “The crime rate among first-generation immigrants — those who came to this country from somewhere else — is significantly lower than the overall crime rate.”

Recipients of the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act (DREAMers) also had significantly lower incarceration rates than the native-born population, according to the CATO Institute. Therefore, the “risk to the public safety to national security” seems a weak veneer in light of evidence to the contrary.

Additionally, the government deports undocumented immigrants infrequently because of crime. According to Pew Research Center, 60 percent of undocumented immigrants are deported without criminal record from 2001 to 2015. A possible explanation for this high number may lie in unconstitutional practices by ICE.

The American Civil Liberties Union is currently fighting the federal government's imprisonment and deportation of undocumented immigrants without due process.

The fight against unjust deportations occurs in Athens, too. The Clark County Sheriff's office reversed its policy on undocumented immigrants in July 2017, which the greater community learned about in December. The Sheriff's office now cooperates with ICE agents to detain Athens people based on immigration status, a controversial change which leaves undocumented immigrants vulnerable in Athens.

Undocumented immigrants face warranted fear because of this change. 4.5 million children live with one or both undocumented parents according to Pew Hispanic Research Center, and these children face severe amounts of stress and anxiety because of their parents' undocumented status.

“For many participants, the potential for a direct encounter with law enforcement produced considerable fear, worry, and stress,” wrote Gulbas and Zayas in "Exploring the Effects of U.S. Immigration Enforcement on the Well-being of Citizen Children in Mexican Immigrant Families." “This awareness led to extreme fear of police officers. When Maria [10-year-old] saw a police car near her house, she would run inside, close the curtains and cry profusely. It was not until the police left the vicinity that Maria would realize her parents were safe, and only then would she come out of hiding.”

Current treatment of undocumented immigrants harms undocumented immigrants and their children without just cause and often unconstitutionally. The Clarke County Sheriff office ought to change its policy and protect its people most at risk to create a more just Athens, both for the current population and for the next generation of children with immigrant parents. Athens should be a place where people are brought together, not torn apart.