



Could exposing real lives of U.S. deportees turn anti-immigrant tide?

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Portraying people deported from the United States as friends, neighbors and co-workers with deep ties to the country could help stem anti-immigrant sentiment fueled by President Donald Trump, according to a top human rights leader.

As Trump steps up arrests of illegal immigrants, telling their personal stories could build support for limited deportations, Kenneth Roth, executive director of U.S.-founded Human Rights Watch, told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

Of the 11 million undocumented immigrants in the United States, 60 percent have been in the country a decade or longer, he said, and U.S. immigration policy should take their long-term status into consideration in deportations.

"Trump gets away with his immigration policy by caricaturing these people," said Roth in an interview at his office on the 34th floor of New York City's Empire State Building.

"The only way to change that is to introduce facts to counter Trump's rhetoric and show that the people being deported are people who essentially have been Americanized," he said.

"They're neighbors and they're workers and they're friends."

Roth, 61, an American attorney who has led Human Rights Watch since 1993, has been a leading voice of concern over the rise of racism, xenophobia and Islamophobia alongside the growing appeal of populism in the West.

In January this year he stated that Trump's inauguration opened up a "dangerous and uncertain" new era for rights in the United States.

A family on the Mexico side chats with relatives after an open gate event on the fence along the Mexico and U.S border on Universal Children's Day in Tijuana, Mexico November 19, 2016.
REUTERS/Jorge Duenes

TIES TO U.S.

Trump's crackdown on people in the United States illegally marks a shift from former President Barack Obama who focused on deporting illegal immigrants who had committed serious crimes.

Trump has said undocumented immigrants are more likely to commit crimes and during his campaign accused Mexico of sending rapists and drug dealers over the border.

However, studies show immigrants less likely than native-born Americans to commit violent or property crimes. Research by the American Immigration Council, which advocates policy reform, the nonpartisan National Bureau of Economic Research and the libertarian Cato Institute along with government data, also show immigrants far less likely to be imprisoned.

Human Rights Watch, which shared the 1997 Nobel Peace Prize for campaigning against landmines, has stationed researchers on the border with Mexico to interview people being deported and publicizes their stories on social media, Roth said.

They include a man who lived in the United States for 22 years and had five children who were U.S. citizens, another who had served in the U.S. Army, and a third who had just saved up enough money with his wife to buy a house in California.

"By introducing who these people are as human beings, and their real life stories and the strong reasons for letting them stay, we can help to shift public opinion," he said.

Roth, who is about to move to Switzerland to work in the group's Geneva offices temporarily, said he would like to see Congress pass legislation that recognizes the rights of undocumented immigrants with established ties to stay in the United States.

"There is a need to look behind the mere legality of citizenship to ask more fundamentally who should we consider an American?" he said.

"At some point, when we've let them establish ties to the community, we've let them build families and lives in the United States, is it right to summarily deport them?"