



## **America must stop kicking out children who were legally raised and educated here when they turn 21**

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August 13, 2021

Most Americans assume that if somebody has been lawfully residing in America for long enough, they can eventually apply for citizenship. In fact, that's far from true. Current immigration policy allows many children to be legally raised and educated in America, only to be kicked out once they turn 21. We're known as Documented Dreamers.

Over 16 years ago, when I was nine years old, my parents moved to the United States to start a small business in Southern Illinois. This country raised me, educated me, and immersed me in its culture. But like 200,000 other young people whose parents brought them here on long-term visas, I could soon be separated from my family and forced to relocate to a country I hardly know. I'm often asked, "Why don't you just apply for citizenship?" The answer is that *I can't*. Our visas require us to wait decades for green cards or offer no green card at all, so we "age out" of our status at 21.

Dreamers, both documented and undocumented, face staggering insecurity in this country. This was laid bare on July 16 when a federal judge in Texas declared the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) policy unlawful. But the program, which protects undocumented Dreamers from deportation, never applied to documented young people like myself. Congressional legislation like the Dream Act doesn't include a provision for us either. It's why I'm urging the Biden administration and Congress to take our plight seriously; all Dreamers deserve protections, whether or not they're documented.

To address this inequity, I started Improve The Dream, a youth-led organization advocating for Documented Dreamers. After years, our hard work paid off. Last month, Representatives Deborah Ross (D-NC) and Mariannette Miller-Meeke (R-IA), introduced the bipartisan America's CHILDREN Act, which would allow children who have lived in the U.S. with legal status for 10 years and graduated from an American university to apply for permanent residency. Senator Padilla will be introducing the bill in the Senate. Such legislation would not only keep our families together but reap significant fiscal benefits for the country.

About four years ago, while pursuing a Doctor of Pharmacy program at St. Louis College of Pharmacy school, I started reaching out to Congressional offices. Most had never heard of Documented Dreamers — they were surprised that our situation was even possible. It's true that some Documented Dreamers can switch to different visas and temporarily extend their stay after they turn 21. I was fortunate enough to obtain a temporary status that allows me to work here as a pharmacist — albeit with no path to citizenship or guarantee that my visa will be renewed.

It's unfair to force us to leave our families, friends, and neighbors. But our self-deportation is also a serious loss to the country that raised and educated us. Thousands of Documented Dreamers who have managed to obtain temporary status after 21 have made important contributions on the pandemic front lines. We not only fill critical gaps in health care, technology, and other industries, but we provide the nation billions in fiscal benefits, according to the Cato Institute. Moreover, protecting us would encourage more high-skilled immigrant workers and investors like my parents to move their families to this country. That would ultimately improve job creation and wages among U.S. workers and bolster critical STEM industries, according to research from New American Economy.

Through Improve the Dream, I've met so many accomplished young people whose future in America is under threat. Take Hilary Yoon, who came here from South Korea when she was 10 months old. Her family started a café in Portland, Oregon and became a staple in the community. But Hilary's older brother and sister were forced to self deport after completing college. Now at age 17, she hopes to work in the medical field, but she fears a similar fate. Preen Mhatre was four months old when her family immigrated from India. Her parents studied at the University of Iowa, where they're now full-time employees. Even though Preen grew up on the campus, she was legally mandated to enroll as an international student. She's currently a rising UI senior studying biomedical engineering—the type of STEM professional America desperately needs. But under U.S. immigration policy, she'll face self-deportation when she graduates.

In addition to passing America's CHILDREN Act, Congressional efforts to protect Dreamers should include the Documented Dreamers among us. That means amending proposed legislation like the Dream Act, co-sponsored by my own Senator Dick Durbin. Without a new policy, America is not only failing us — it's failing itself. All children who grow up in America should have the opportunity to become American.