

JustSouth QUARTERLY



SUMMER 2015

The Joys and Challenges of Family Reunification



Yerlin Sabillon views the photo of the reunion of her and her brother, Michael, with their father, Ivan, after ten years of separation.

Photo courtesy of William Widmer, www.widmerphoto.com

Immigrant Families One Year after the "Border Surge"

By SUE WEISHAR, PH.D.

In May and June of 2014, the "surge" of children crossing the U.S./Mexico border unaccompanied by a parent or guardian dominated headlines. By the end of Fiscal Year (FY) 2014, a record number of unaccompanied immigrant children (UIC), 68,541, had been taken into custody by U.S. border officials, double the number in the prior year.¹ Family sponsors in the Gulf South received 29 percent of the 53,518 children referred from border officials to the Department of Health and Human Services (DHS) for reunification with family members.²

Gulf South State	Unaccompanied Children Reunited with Sponsors in FY 2014
Alabama	786
Florida	5,445
Louisiana	1,755
Mississippi	290
Texas	7,409
Gulf South Totals	15,685

To better understand how once-separated families are doing, I interviewed immigrant mothers and their children in Mississippi and Louisiana about their experiences of finally being reunited after years of separation.³

Immigrant Family Stories

Marta's youngest child was only 17 months old when she left Guatemala in 2005 to escape crushing poverty. Her husband was a hard worker, but when he tried to get ahead, the police would hassle him and accuse him of stealing. Marta realized soon after coming to the U.S. that life here was much better and that she and her husband could provide their children "with everything they needed" by working hard. Her husband joined her a year later in New Orleans. They would not see their three children for another eight years, until they were reunited in June 2014 after the children had spent almost three weeks in a DHS shelter near El Paso after crossing Mexico with a coyote hired by their parents.

Describing that moment on a rainy April morning in her family's New Orleans apartment, Marta said: "I felt joy. I felt as if I were born

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again. I came back to life.” But her joy was mixed with sadness when she realized how neglected her children had been by the people they had hired as caretakers in Guatemala. Her then-14-year-old son was the size of a 10-year-old. Her youngest son had bad teeth. She wept when she realized “they did not know what the support of a mother was.” The next five months would be a period of profound joy at being a family again, but also great adjustment. She and her husband and children needed to forge new relationships, and the children had to adapt to new schools and a new country.⁴

At first her two youngest sons, now 10 and 15, resisted going to school. Her daughter, now 17, refused to obey her mother’s orders. Marta said that because the children knew they could not disobey their father without serious consequences, they eventually adjusted to their parents’ expectations regarding school and home life, but it took five months for the “rebelliousness” to end.

Cellular telephones and other technology, including Skype and webcasts, have made communication between migrants and families in their home countries relatively inexpensive. Marta would speak to her children almost daily; it was much more difficult, however, for Teresa. She fled domestic violence and poverty in Guatemala in 2007 when her son, Santos, was 9-years-old. In the U.S. Teresa became involved with another abusive and controlling man who refused to allow her to call her son. She lost touch with Santos for two years. When she was able to speak with him later, the calls were excruciating. Santos, who now lives with his mother in Biloxi, Mississippi, explained to me: “I cried [when we spoke] because I felt abandoned. I was hungry all the time. I did not even have any shoes. ...My grandparents, who are very poor, hit me all the time and my uncles, too.”

Researchers with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees found that 22 percent of unaccompanied children who had crossed the border spoke of abuse and violence by family members as a reason for fleeing.⁵ Other children, however, may form close and loving attachments to the family members who care for them after their parents migrate. Once reunified, children may miss their caretakers and have feelings of loss and sadness.⁶ This was evident during a

particularly poignant moment at a Teach-In on Migration that JSRI held in February when a recent child migrant broke down crying when describing how much he missed his uncle’s family in Honduras.

When a child’s caretaker in the home country is disparaging of the parent who migrates, reunification can be much more difficult. Another complicating factor is change in family composition due to new siblings or a new partner.⁷ Lupe and her husband came to New Orleans almost 30 years ago without documents and without their daughter, Francesca, who was left in the care of Lupe’s sister-in-law. Lupe and her husband had two more daughters before they were finally able to bring Francesca to the U.S. after Lupe naturalized. The reunification has been a disaster. Francesca’s aunt was jealous and disparaging of Lupe, and Francesca came to deeply resent and distrust her mother for leaving her in Honduras. When she began living with her sisters in her parents’ home, Francesca became verbally abusive to her youngest sister, whom she claimed was unfairly favored by her parents. One year after being reunited after 28 years of separation, Lupe and Francesca are no longer speaking.

Conclusion

In April 2015, the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) warned that the border crisis has subsided but is not over, as the number of unaccompanied immigrant children and families crossing the U.S./Mexico Border remains at historic high levels. WOLA projects 37,036 UIC apprehensions in FY 2015—a 45 percent decrease from FY 2014 but nearly equal to FY 2013 apprehensions.⁸

Conditions that led to children and families fleeing the Northern Triangle⁹ countries have not improved in the past year; the violence is even worse.¹⁰ The number of child migrants and families crossing the border has decreased because Mexico is doing what one advocate calls the U.S. government’s “dirty work” by apprehending and deporting more migrants in Mexico and cracking down on the use of Mexican freight trains (*la Bestia*) as transportation for Central American migrants.¹¹ Many have argued that such repression of irregular migration is counterproductive, driving

migrants further underground, thereby empowering flexible and opportunistic smuggling rings.¹²

Now, more than ever, comprehensive immigration reform that would expedite family reunification, create an earned path to citizenship, strengthen refugee protection, and address why “desperate people reluctantly uproot and cross borders” is needed.¹³

ENDNOTES

- ¹ The Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2008 requires that U.S. border officials take into custody unaccompanied children from countries non-contiguous to the U.S., screen them, and transfer the children to the Office of Refugee Resettlement, ORR, within 72 hours for health screenings and placement with family members. See *Wilber Wilberforce Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2008 (TVPRA)* at <http://www.state.gov/j/tip/laws/113178.htm>
- ² From “Unaccompanied Children Released to Sponsors by State, Office of Refugee Resettlement,” at <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ort/programs/ucs/state-by-state-uc-placed-sponsors>. The apprehension of families at the border, composed largely of mothers and small children from Central America and Mexico, also hit record numbers in FY 2014, totaling 66,973 family unit members. Families crossing the border are not protected by the TVPRA. Last summer the Obama administration reinstated the much criticized practice of detaining families as a way to “deter” future families from coming, despite the profoundly negative effects detention has on children’s well-being and parent-child relationships.
- ³ The interviews took place in April and May 2015. Names and identifying information of interviewees have been changed to protect their anonymity. My thanks to the staff of El Pueblo/Seashore Mission in Biloxi, Mississippi, for arranging a phone interview with their clients.
- ⁴ See Carola Suárez-Orozco, Irina L.G. Todorova, and Josephine Louie, “Making up for lost time: The experience of separation and reunification among immigrant families,” *Family Process*, Volume 41, No. 4, pp. 625-643. 2002.
- ⁵ *Children on the Run: Unaccompanied Children Leaving Central America and Mexico and the Need for International Protection*, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Regional Office for the United States and Caribbean, 2014.
- ⁶ Carola Suárez-Orozco, Irina L.G. Todorova, and Josephine Louie. Op. Cit.
- ⁷ Ibid.

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Catholic Social Thought and Unions

During the Industrial Revolution, Pope Leo XIII laid out the Church’s position on labor unions in his encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*,¹ in the context of “a cry of protest against the exploitation of poor workers.”² The pope solemnly rejected a then-dominant economic tenet, “that labor is a commodity to be bought at market prices determined by the law of supply and demand rather than by the human needs of the worker.”³

Pope Leo set the foundation in human dignity and the related belief that work is not just a commodity to be bought and sold. From these he developed specific rights belonging to workers—rights typical of union advocacy: reasonable hours, rest periods, health safeguards, and humane working conditions; special provisions for women and children, including minimum age requirements [59, 60, and 64]⁴; a wage sufficient to support a worker who is “thrifty and upright” and, by implication, his or her family [63]; and the right to form workers’ associations—unions [69-72].

Eighty years later, in *Laborem Exercens*,⁵ St. Pope John Paul II focused on work as “the essential key, to the whole social question” [3]. John Paul argued that, through the *Genesis* work-mandate “to subdue the earth,” humans image their Creator and share God’s creative action. This insight into work “implies a more equitable redistribution not only of income and wealth, but also of work itself in such a way that there may be employment for all.”⁶ Thus, the Pope reaffirmed worker and union rights, urging “worker solidarity” for social justice, an essential mission of the “church of the poor” [8].

Pope John Paul also called for “suitable employment for all who are capable of it,” and, when unavailable, unemployment benefits provided by employers or, upon their failure, the state [18]; just remuneration for work by a family head sufficient “for establishing and properly maintaining a family and for providing security for its future” [19], including a family wage or social measures such as family allowances for child-raising mothers; provision of health care, coverage of work accidents, inexpensive or free medical assistance for workers and families, old age pensions and insurance; and appropriate vacations and holidays [19]. Trade and professional unions are necessary, he maintained, and retain the right to organize, act politically, and to strike “within just limits” [20].

More recently, in *Caritas in Veritate*,⁷ Pope Benedict reiterated certain traditional particulars about human work: that it be freely chosen; not subject to discrimination; enable a family to meet their needs and

the educational needs of children; not rely on child labor; allow organization of workers (unions) and their voices to be heard; and support a decent retirement [63]. He underscored the importance of labor unions and their need to be open to defending the rights of others besides their own members and the interests of “workers in developing countries where social rights are often violated” [64].

Recognizing that union rights and negotiating capacity often are now more limited by governments and economic forces—increasing the powerlessness of citizens in the public sector and the economy—the pope wrote that the traditional promotion of workers’ associations must “be honored today even more than in the past, as a prompt and far-sighted response to the urgent need for new forms of cooperation at the international level, as well as the local level” [25].

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum (On the Condition of Labor)*, May 15, 1891.
- 2 Donal Dorr, *Option for the Poor: A Hundred Years of Vatican Social Teaching* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1983).
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 12.
- 4 Numbers in brackets refer to numbers in the document texts..
- 5 Pope St. John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens (On Human Work)*, September 14, 1981.
- 6 Vatican Congregation for Catholic Education, *Guidelines for the Study and Teaching of the Church’s Social Doctrine in the Formation of Priests*, December 30, 1988, in *Origins*, Vol. 19, No. 11, August 3, 1989, pp. 169-92, No. 26.
- 7 Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate (Charity in Truth)*, June 29, 2009.



STOP LOCKING UP OUR FUTURE

End the School-to-Prison Pipeline



Photo courtesy of: © Richard Ross, www.juvenile-in-justice.com

"Really I am doing time here for nothing." —S.I., age 15

The perversity of the criminal justice system is perhaps most apparent in the way the U.S. has created a "school-to-prison pipeline."

The criminalization of blackness, deeply rooted in U.S. history and culture, is being reproduced at the earliest stages of socialization, including the elementary and secondary school systems. The school-to-prison pipeline encompasses a wide range of punitive practices, including so-called "zero-tolerance" discipline, inserting police into schools, creating alternative disciplinary schools, and building secured juvenile detention centers.

As the United States leads all nations in the rate at which it incarcerates its citizens and disproportionately incarcerates citizens of color, it also arrests more children under the age of 18 than any other nation. Whereas the U.S. arrests 336 per 100,000 children, the second-highest arresting nation, South Africa, arrests 69 per 100,000.

The Center for Public Integrity (CPI) ranked states by their rate of referral to police per 1,000 students (elementary and high school students under age 18). Nationally, 5.8 per 1,000 students are referred to police. While 15.9 percent of all students nationally are black, 26.9 percent of all referrals to law enforcement are black. Although whites are nearly 52 percent of all students, only 40.7 percent of all referrals are white. The rate of referrals to law enforcement per 1,000 students nationally is 9.8 for blacks, 5.9 for Hispanics, 4.6 for whites, and 10.9 for youth with disabilities.

Florida is ranked third, Mississippi 25th, Louisiana 28th, Texas 31st, and Alabama 38th in the CPI state rankings of students referred to law enforcement.¹ Florida's juvenile arrest rate is 40 percent above the national average. Although black students comprise about 23 percent of all students in Florida, they are 36 percent of all students arrested. Hispanic students comprise 28.5 percent of all Florida students and 24.2 percent of all students arrested. White students comprise 42.4 percent of all Florida students and 34.1 percent of all arrested students. The Florida rate of arrests per 1,000 students was 19.4 for blacks, 10.5 for Hispanics, and 9.9 for whites.

Whereas 44.9 percent of all Louisiana students are black, 62.3 percent of all referrals are black. Conversely, while 47.5 percent of all students are white, 24.8 percent of all referrals are white. Although

By ALEX MIKULICH, PH.D.

Hispanic students constitute 4 percent of all students, they were referred to law enforcement at the rate of 6.7 per thousand. Students who are disabled comprise 14.1 percent of all pupils, yet they comprise 34 percent of all referrals. Thus the respective rate of referral per 1,000 students is 7 for blacks, 6.7 for hispanics, 2.6 for whites, and 12.1 for students with disabilities in Louisiana.

It costs significantly more to incarcerate youth than to educate them. The national cost of incarcerating one young person for 12 months is approximately \$88,000.² Tuition for one year at Harvard University—nearly \$60,000—is far less expensive than incarceration!

The cost of incarcerating youth in Louisiana is significantly higher. According to Louisiana's legislative auditor, it costs \$454 per day and \$154,760 per year to imprison a juvenile.³ In 2014, Louisiana spent less than \$4,000 per student per year for public education.⁴

Imagine: Louisiana could spend \$22,000 per student per year, the cost of attending the most expensive private school in Orleans Parish, Isidore Newman School, and save \$132,760 over the cost of incarceration. That would likely end the school-to-prison pipeline by providing a quality education that every family and child deserves. The opportunity cost or value lost by excluding youth from quality education is detrimental to our entire society because it prevents youth from achieving anything close to their full potential.

Gulf South states can take steps to end the school-to-prison pipeline. One such step is ending referrals to the adult criminal justice system. A Florida House Justice Appropriations Subcommittee killed House Bill 783 in April, a measure that would have prohibited prosecutors from transferring children under 16 to the adult system.

Louisiana is one of nine states that automatically transfers a 17-year-old to the adult criminal justice system. And sadly, 14- to 16-year-olds are too frequently transferred to the adult system in Louisiana. Representative Walt Leger Jr. presented a concurrent resolution (73) in March that would charge the state Institute of Public Health and Justice to study the question of raising the age of juvenile jurisdiction to 17. This resolution passed and the study will be conducted over the next seven months.⁵

Research is clear that referring children to the adult criminal justice system ruins young lives, leads to more crime, and increases costs to the state. We know that too often youth in the system have already experienced serious trauma, including violence, and that incarceration only re-traumatizes youth as it exposes them to further abuse and neglect.

A recent study in Texas found that outcomes are better for youth kept under supervision closer to home rather than in secure state-run facilities.⁶ It shows that youth locked up in juvenile detention facilities are 21 percent more likely to be arrested again than those monitored close to home. Those who committed another offense after time in a detention facility are three times as likely to carry out more crimes later on.

As Tania Galloni of the Southern Poverty Law Center puts it: "We must stop locking up our future and throwing away the key."⁷

Special thanks to Rachel Gassert, policy director of the Juvenile Justice Project, for her assistance in preparing this essay.

ENDNOTES

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- 5 House Concurrent Resolution 73, original text online at <https://www.legis.la.gov/Legis/ViewDocument.aspx?d=940926>
- 6 Tony Fabelo, Nancy Arrigona, Michael D. Thompson, Austin Clemens, and Miner P. Marchbanks III, "Closer to Home: An Analysis of State and Local Impact of Texas Juvenile Justice Reforms," Council of State Governments Justice Center and the Public Policy Research Institute, Texas A & M University, January 29, 2015, available online at <http://csgjusticecenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/texas-JJ-reform-closer-to-home.pdf>
- 7 Tania Galloni, "End state policy that ruins young lives and leads to more crime," *The Tampa Tribune*, March 11, 2015, available online at <http://tbo.com/list/news-opinion-commentary/end-state-policy-that-ruins-young-lives-and-leads-to-more-crime-20150311/>



The Suffering South

Anti-Union and Poorer for It

BY FRED KAMMER, S.J.



As we look forward to Labor Day, we should note the role of organized labor and the impact of unions on economic well-being, especially in the Gulf South. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) of the U.S. Department of Labor gives the overall picture of union membership as of 2014: The number of wage and salary workers belonging to unions is 14.6 million, which is 11.1 percent of all such workers. This number is down from 17.7 million union workers, 20.1 percent of the total, in 1983, the first year for which comparable union data was available.¹

BLS also reported:

- Union membership is more than five times higher (35.7 percent) among public-sector workers than private-sector workers (6.6 percent).
- Union membership is higher among men (11.7 percent) than women (10.5 percent).
- Union membership is higher among black workers (13.2 percent) than whites (10.8 percent), Asians (10.4 percent), or Hispanics (9.2 percent).
- Unions represent 16.2 million wage and salary workers, including 14.6 million union members and 1.6 million workers who report no union affiliation but whose jobs are covered by a union contract.
- Median weekly earnings of union members are \$970, while nonunion workers earn only 79 percent of union earnings (\$763).²

Except in Alabama,³ the five Gulf South states lag far behind the national rates for union representation and membership, as indicated in the table below:

Mississippi has the lowest rates in the region and the third-lowest in the country.

“Right to Work” States

It is well-known that the Southern states are more hostile to unions. After Congress adopted the Taft-Hartley Act in 1947, many Southern states quickly used the authority in that law to pass so-called “right-to-work” (RTW) laws, including all five Gulf South states. These prohibited unions from making membership or payment of dues a condition of employment, either before or after a worker was hired.⁴ These RTW laws go one step further and entitle employees to all the benefits of the union contract—including union representation for worker grievances against employers—but without paying the costs.⁵ Wages in the 25 RTW states are 3.1 percent lower than those in non-RTW states, after controlling for a full range of individual demographic and socioeconomic factors as well as state macroeconomic indicators. In dollar terms, this means \$1,558 in lower annual wages for a typical full-time, full-year worker in RTW states.⁶

Union Wage Premium

In general, union membership is recognized as responsible for raising both wages and total compensation (wages and benefits). The percentage of higher wages earned by those covered by a collective bargaining agreement (union members and others) as compared with those not covered is called the “union wage

Union Affiliation of Employed Wage and Salary Workers, 2013–14 Averages

Region	Total Employed	Union Members	Percent of Employed	Represented by Unions	Percent of Employed
United States	131,431,000	14,600,000	11.1%	16,200,000	12.3%
Alabama	1,887,000	204,000	10.8%	228,000	12.1%
Florida	8,042,000	455,000	5.7%	561,000	7.0%
Louisiana	1,834,000	96,000	5.2%	118,000	6.4%
Mississippi	1,028,000	38,000	3.7%	46,000	4.5%
Texas	11,205,000	543,000	4.8%	700,000	6.2%



premium,” and the percentage difference in benefits is the “union benefit premium.” The union wage premium is 13.6 percent overall—17.3 percent for men and 9.1 percent for women. Black workers have a union wage premium of 17.3 percent, Hispanics 23.1 percent, and whites 10.9 percent. By raising wages for lower-paid minorities more than for whites, the union wage premium actually helps to close the racial/ethnic wage gaps.⁷

In general, unionization raises wages more for low- and middle-wage workers than for higher-wage workers, more for blue-collar than for white-collar workers, and more for those without a college degree.⁸ Across the nation, however, union representation fell dramatically among blue-collar and high school-educated male workers from 37.9 percent in 1978 to 14.9 percent in 2011. This weakened the positive effect of unions on the wages of high school-educated workers and widened the college/high school wage gap and contributed to growing inequality.⁹

Union Benefit Premium

The union benefit premium is most evident in health insurance, pensions, and paid time off. When adjusted for establishment size, occupation, industry, full-time, part-time, and other factors, union workers are 28.2 percent more likely to have employer-provided health insurance while working and 24.4 percent more likely to have retiree health coverage; they are 53.9 percent more likely to have pension coverage, and they enjoy about three days more paid vacation and 14.3 percent more paid vacations and holidays.¹⁰

Workplace Protections

Unions have been at the forefront (along with many others, including the U.S. Catholic Church) in advocating for workplace protections and key benefits such as the National Labor Relations Act and Social Security Act of 1935, the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, the Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970, the Family Medical Leave Act of 1993, and increases in minimum wage at the federal level and in some states. With very weak Gulf South unions, these states lag behind in worker protection and social benefits. Consider two examples: minimum wage legislation and Medicaid expansion.

Regarding minimum wage, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana have no such laws; Texas adopts the federal minimum (now \$7.25 hour) but does not apply it to any employment subject to the federal Fair Labor Standards Act (which would assure additional time-and-a-half and other wage and hour requirements); and Florida has set its minimum wage just above the federal level at \$8.05, and it increases annually based on a cost-of-living formula.¹¹

These five states also are refusing to implement the Medicaid expansion provisions of the Affordable Care Act (ACA). This provision would provide health care coverage under the federal Medicaid program to those who are not currently qualified for Medicaid and not making sufficient income to qualify for health care insurance subsidies under the ACA. Most of these are non-unionized working poor Americans without employer-sponsored health coverage. Of the 5.7 million people

deprived of this ACA health insurance option, almost half—2,721,000—reside in the five Gulf South states: Alabama (235,000), Florida (848,000), Louisiana (265,000), Mississippi (165,000), and Texas (1,208,000). These are among the states with the highest levels of poverty and the greatest health needs. The weakness of organized labor, as well as regional conservatism, contribute to the intransigence of elected leaders in the face of such glaring needs.¹²

These examples and others explain the consistent support of the Catholic Church for unions—not just because of the direct effect on workers but because of their important contributions to the common good. See *Catholic Social Thought and Unions* on page 3.

ENDNOTES

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- 2 Ibid. BLS notes: “The comparisons of earnings in this release are on a broad level and do not control for many factors that can be important in explaining earnings differences.”
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- 9 Ibid., p. 6.
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Jesuit Social Research Institute
6363 St. Charles Avenue, Box 94
New Orleans, LA 70118-6143

(504) 864-7746
e-mail: jsri@loyno.edu

loyno.edu/jsri/

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THE JOYS AND CHALLENGES OF FAMILY REUNIFICATION

⁸ Adam Isacson, *Latest Border Stats Suggest Higher Family, Child Migration in 2015 than Official Projections*, April 10, 2015, at http://www.wola.org/commentary/unaccompanied_children_at_the_us_mexico_border_in_the_first_half_of_2015

⁹ The Northern Triangle counties are Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador.

¹⁰ For example, the truce negotiated between rival gangs in El Salvador in 2011 has begun to break down. Murders in that country are up 70 percent in the first half of 2014. The Zetas, a violent transnational criminal organization from Mexico, appear to be consolidating control over local police and the military in Guatemala. Elizabeth Carlson and Anna Marie Gallagher, "Humanitarian protection for children fleeing gang-based violence in the Americas," *Journal on Migration and Human Security*, Volume 3, Number 2, pp. 129-158. 2015.

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¹² *End of Mission Statement Migrants and the Mediterranean: UN rights expert on human rights of migrants follow up visit to Brussels for further development of his study on EU border management* at <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=15544&LangID=E>

¹³ See Bailey Dick, *Immigration Is a Pro-Life Issue*, at Faith in Public Life, January 20, 2015, <http://www.faithinpubliclife.org/blog/immigrationlife/>

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JustSouth is published quarterly by the Jesuit Social Research Institute, College of Social Sciences, Loyola University New Orleans, 6363 St. Charles Avenue, Box 94, New Orleans, LA 70118

The *JustSouth Monthly* is published 12 times a year and is available upon request without charge at jsri@loyno.edu. Copyright 2014 © Jesuit Social Research Institute. ISSN 2161-315X.

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